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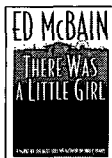
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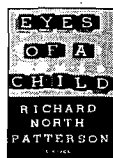
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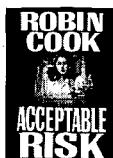
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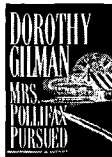
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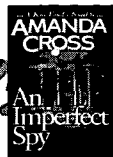
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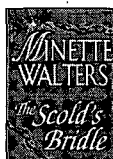
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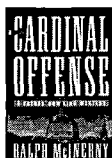
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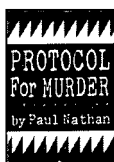
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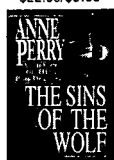
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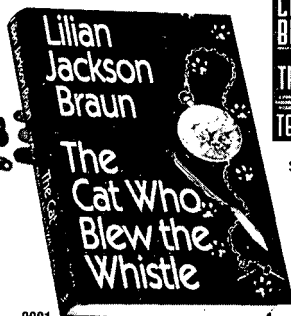
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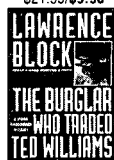
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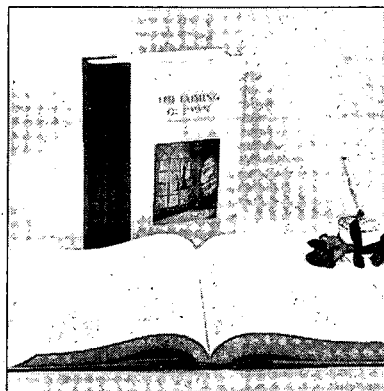
Owings Mills, Maryland – The National Library of Poetry has just announced that \$24,000 in prizes will be awarded over the next 12 months in the North American Open Amateur Poetry Contest. The contest is open to everyone and entry is free.

“We’re especially looking for poems from new or unpublished poets,” indicated Howard Ely, spokesperson for The National Library of Poetry; “we have a ten year history of awarding large prizes to talented poets who have never before won any type of writing competition.”

How To Enter

Anyone may enter the competition simply by sending in one original poem, any subject, any style to:

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The poem should be no more than 20 lines, and the poet's name and address must appear on the top of the page. “Each poem received will be acknowledged, usually within seven weeks,” indicated Mr. Ely.

Possible Publication

Many submitted poems will also be considered for inclusion in one of The National Library of Poetry's forthcoming hardbound anthologies. Anthologies published by the organization have included *On the Threshold of a Dream*, *Days of Future's Past*, *Of Diamonds and Rust*, and *Moments More to Go*, among others. ■

EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

If you like Mary Kittredge's "White Mountain Murder," our cover story in this issue, and if you like medical mysteries, you will want to know about Ms. Kittredge's new hardcover novel, *Kill or Cure*, from St. Martin's Press, an Edwina Crusoe, R.N., story. Also just out from St. Martin's, the paperback edition of Edwina Crusoe's next most recent investigation, *Desperate Remedy*.

Ms. Kittredge knows her medical stuff, having spent fifteen years as a certified respiratory therapist at Yale-New Haven Hospital, for one thing. She was, by the way, the winner of the 1986 Robert L. Fish Award for Best First Mystery Short Story for "Father to the Man," published in AHMM.

Since then, she has written a half dozen Edwina Crusoe novels and three starring Charlotte Kent, the protagonist in "White Mountain Murder."

We want to welcome two authors new to our magazine in this issue, Larry Tritten and Martha B. G. Lufkin. Mr. Tritten, author of "Three Bananas," is by no means, however, a new writer. His short stories and articles have appeared in *Harper's*, *Playboy*, *Asimov's Science Fiction*, *The New Yorker*, *Vanity Fair*, *F&SF*, and many other publications; several novels were published in the 1970's. Born in Nebraska and reared in Idaho, he now lives in San Francisco with his two black cats, Nibs and Calliope.

(continued on page 154)

Cathleen Jordan, Editor; **Susan A. Teitz**, Assistant Editor; **Jean Traina**, Design Director; **Terri Czezczko**, Art Director; **Anthony Bari**, Junior Designer; **Marilyn Roberts**, Director of Production; **Carole Dixon**, Production Manager; **Cynthia Manson**, Vice President of Marketing and Subsidiary Rights; **Constance Scarborough**, Contracts Manager; **Barbara Parrott**, Director of Newsstand Circulation; **Bruce Schwartz**, Director of Circulation, Subscription Sales; **Dennis Jones**, Operations Manager, Subscription Sales; **Fred Sabloff**, Associate Publisher; **Judy Dorman**, Advertising Sales Manager. **Advertising Offices**, New York: (212) 782-8549. **Advertising Representative**: Dresner Direct, Inc., New York, New York, (212) 889-1078.

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FICTION

COMPANY A

David K. Harford

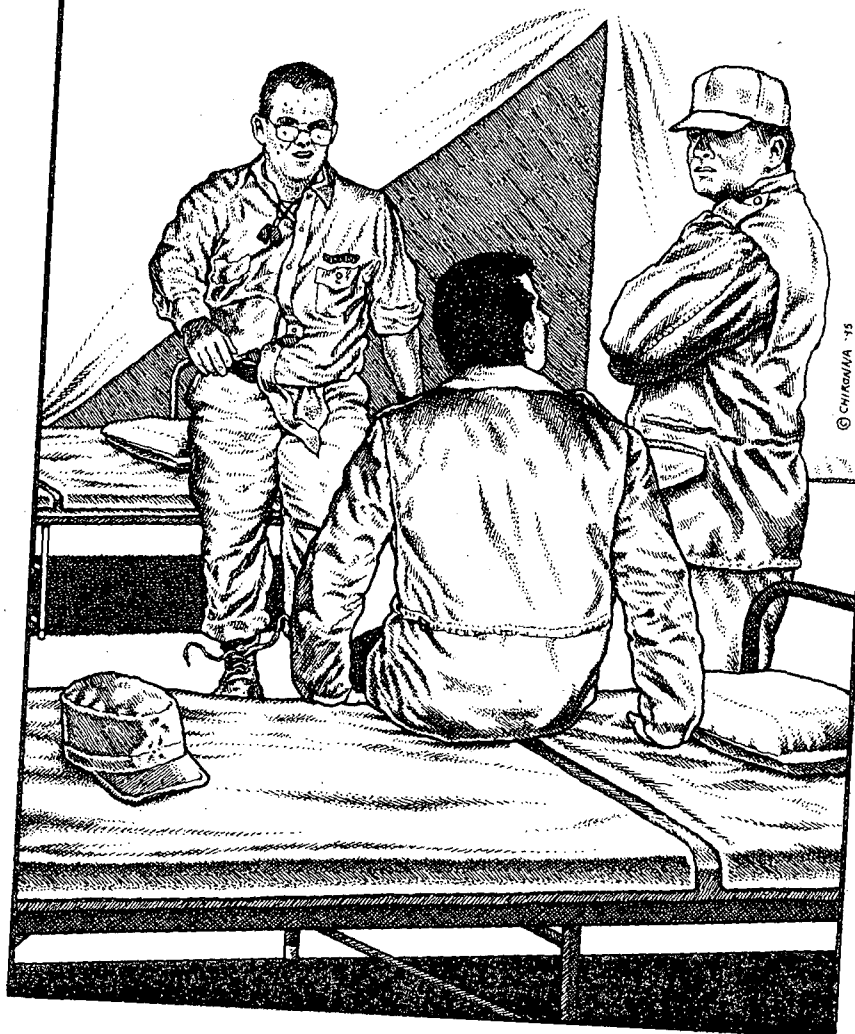


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We were a week into the monsoons.

I stood just inside the open tent flap watching the steady downpour of rain cut new and deeper gouges into the mud-slick ground, amazed that so much rain could fall for so long.

If it had ever poured like this back home in Pennsylvania, I imagined the small mountain creek near our house would have rushed over its banks. But this wasn't Pennsylvania; wasn't even the good old U.S. of A. It was L.Z. Victoria, the fire-base for the Third Brigade of the Sixth Infantry Division, a small tent city secured within its parameter wire, bunkers, and guard towers built just outside Phu Bien in the godforsaken jungles of the Central Highlands of Vietnam.

Behind me the MP desk sergeant was typing up copies of my recent interrogation, struggling to read my handwriting. I turned from watching the rain drench the MP compound just as he said, "Right here, Mr. Hatchett. Does this say:

"Hatchett: And then you sold the generators to a Vietnamese named Quon?"

"Colonel Redding: Yes. I did.

"Hatchett: How much per unit did Quon pay you?"

"Colonel Redding: Seven hundred and fifty.

"Hatchett: In Vietnamese piasters or American dollars?"

"Colonel Redding: Ameri—"

The telephone land line jingled, and the MP grabbed it. "He's standing right here," he said into the receiver and surprised me when he handed me the phone over his typewriter. "This is Captain Truly, Company A, First of the Forty-fourth, Mr. Hatchett. Somebody over there just shot himself. When you're done with the phone, keep the switchboard working and I'll call the C.I.D. in Pleiku and tell them you won't be back tonight."

With an ever-increasing weariness, I sighed, nodding, reluctantly agreeing with him while listening to the gravelly voice of Captain Truly. "He was sitting on his cot . . ."

. . . and to the MP's voice: "I'll radio someone to bring in a jeep for you . . ."

. . . and Captain Truly: "Shot in the guts. Doesn't look good. No one seems to know what happened. Everyone was gathering for a meeting. I'm no investigator, but it looks like suicide . . ."

. . . the MP: "Will you be needing Mitch?"

... Truly: "Name's Samuelson. PFC. Better hurry. I think they're about to medi-vac him to Pleiku. Doesn't surprise me Samuelson couldn't even do this right ..." Sarcasm heavier than the rain outside.

... MP: "What else will you need?"

I nodded again, acknowledging the MP's efficiency, just as I hung up on Captain Truly. "Tell base camp we've got another S.I.R. here. Yes, get me that jeep with a driver. And tell Mitch to hurry down to the chopper pad and get a statement from PFC Samuelson before he's flown out of here. If the kid's still alive, maybe he can tell us who shot him."

Immediately I thought of Captain Truly (sometimes referred to as "Unruly Truly") and his very recent successful battle against an overwhelming force of North Vietnamese regulars.

The MP, his fatigue shirt off against the muggy, damp weather, still had the phone in one hand. At the same time he was leaning towards the radio to call in a patrol who'd take me to the 1/44th company area. His face was as twisted as jungle growth, questioning: "I thought Captain Truly said it was a suicide attempt."

I pulled my rain parka over me. "Captain Truly's right.

He's no investigator. He might know about military maneuvers, but he doesn't know diddly-squat about suicides. I'll finish going over that Colonel Redding interrogation with you later." And I stepped out into the rain just as the jeep pulled up out front.

An S.I.R. is army for Serious Incident Report, and the general guidelines read that any time a GI was killed or seriously wounded in an incident not due to combat, where no enemy soldier was involved, it had to be investigated as an S.I.R. This could and did include accidental deaths, foul-ups in combat procedures leading to death or injury, or murder, as in fraggings. Suicides, too. Thanks to a Carol Burnett movie by the same name, years later some of these came to be known as "friendly fire," as in "Mr. and Mrs. Samuelson, your son was killed by 'friendly fire' in the Republic of South Vietnam." I say this because I soon learned that immediately after Mitch questioned a lucid Samuelson lying across the floor of the chopper on his way to larger facilities in Pleiku, the young soldier groaned, spat up a mass of blood, and died before the chopper got off the ground.

Ordinarily Provost Marshal Investigator "Mitch" Mitchley, a member of the Second platoon, Sixth MP Company, where I'd gotten the call, would handle all these preliminaries. Ordinarily he would then call in the S.I.R. to me or to someone else at C.I.D. at Sixth Division base camp near Pleiku, and if necessary, one of us from C.I.D. would take a convoy or chopper to the firebase to make sure the investigation was proceeding without a hitch.

But since I was already on the forward firebase finishing up the Colonel Redding black market incident, I would have been derelict in my duty if I hadn't taken charge of things immediately.

Company A of the 1/44th was crowded between an artillery unit and another infantry unit on a rain-flooded flat piece of ground. The company area comprised a half dozen tents of various sizes: GP (army for General Purpose) Mediums, GP Larges, and one GP Small, all with protective four foot high sandbag walls built around them. Two tall, willow-thin radio antennae bending in the slashing wind and rain marked the C.O.'s tent. Right next to the C.O.'s tent was the tent where Samuelson was sitting on his cot when shot in the

guts, one of the GP Larges, used as sleeping quarters for the third platoon of Company A.

The MP driver and I met Captain Truly inside this tent, where the only light against the darkness outside were four bare bulbs strung across the ceiling, lit from a generator roaring just beyond the tent.

Captain Truly was no "new guy." He'd been in-country a while. I would have guessed that had I already not known it. It wasn't just that his jungle fatigues didn't have that new, bright green, baggy appearance—instead they were worn and fit tight to his skin, the material as sunbleached and pale as the reasons the United States military was in Vietnam had become faded and dimmed for some of us after a while.

No. It wasn't just Truly's fatigues or the old wrinkled slop hat he wore with the left side of the brim folded up and pinned to the side of the hat. Nor the way he wore his standard army issue .45 strapped low to his hip, like an Old West gunfighter. The telltale sign indicating how long a man had been in-country was the glazed, distant look in his eyes, behind which there seemed to be an eternal restlessness, an uneasiness due to being constantly alert. Alert and cautious; the

kind of caution that great fear of the enemy and an even greater fear of dying generates.

He showed me Samuelson's sleeping area: a cot with mosquito netting draped over it and a footlocker at the end of the cot. Samuelson's blood was smeared across the cot and pooled in a sticky mass on the floorboards alongside it. The thirty-some other individual sleeping areas looked basically the same—cots, mosquito netting, and footlockers crowded in two rows along the length of the tent. This left barely enough space in the middle of the tent between the two rows to walk.

In the tent were only Captain Truly, the MP who'd driven me there and who was waiting for me to tell him what to do, and I. Truly had correctly kept everyone else gathered in the mess tent, the only place big enough in the small compound to hold the entire company at once and keep them out of the rain.

"If you need them, Mr. Hatchett, I've got names of two people who heard the shot and found Samuelson lying here. When I got here, they were already working to save him until the ambulance arrived, but I could see he got himself good and he probably wasn't going to make it." Truly let out a long,

exasperated breath and jammed the rim of his slop hat back sharply. "What the hell did Samuelson have to go and do this for? I mean, it's not like I was *that* tough on him. I hope you won't think I drove him to this. I hope your report isn't going to say that. Because you may hear that. The kid was a dud. I had to baby him to make sure he didn't hurt himself or, worse, someone else. His best buddy, PFC Boyer, is the same way. You might want to talk to him. Maybe he can tell you something about what was going on in that empty head of Samuelson's. But am I going to have to watch Boyer now, too? Is he going to follow suit and take himself out, too? They'll do that, you know. Like I don't already have worries enough. I'm an infantry captain, not a damned babysitter."

From the moment I had spoken with Captain Truly on the phone, I had doubted this shooting was a suicide. Mostly because suicides usually go for a head shot, maybe a chest shot. It's cleaner and more decisive. Hardly ever does someone shoot himself on purpose in the stomach. Even a dud who can't seem to do anything right wouldn't do that; even a guy who wanted to wound himself to get out of the army wouldn't shoot himself in the guts. And

now, standing alongside Samuelson's cot, noting that his .45 wasn't lying anywhere near it, anywhere in the tent that I could see, I was more convinced his death wasn't a suicide. It probably wasn't even an accident.

I let Captain Truly ramble on nervously while I opened Samuelson's footlocker, hoping to buy a little time until Mitch arrived to let me know how Samuelson was and if he had been able to say anything. In it, on the top shelf, lay his webbed army belt with an empty holster.

I knelt and scanned across the floorboards under the row of cots.

"We've got the colonel flying in tomorrow for an inspection and to present us with a unit citation," Truly was saying. "How the hell's this going to look? Can't inspect this tent, sir. One of my men offed himself in there yesterday. Christ."

One cot over from Samuelson's cot I spotted it. An empty .45 shell casing. From where the casing lay, I guessed it probably got kicked under the cot during the initial frenzy of people attending to Samuelson. Or was maybe kicked by the shooter or by Samuelson himself thrashing around.

I fetched it, rose, and again surveyed the large tent we

were in. It had flaps on either end for entrance and exit; Samuelson's cot was almost dead center of the fifty foot canvas span.

Captain Truly watched as I sniffed the shell casing. The smell of gunpowder was still fresh and strong. "Do you have Samuelson's .45?" I asked him.

"His what?" He looked genuinely perplexed.

"His pistol, captain. If he shot himself, it should be right here by his cot. Did you or any of your men pick it up?"

"I didn't. I came in and tried to calm Samuelson as best I could while they treated him, but I don't remember seeing any pistol, now that you mention it. Probably Sergeant Baker or Rodriguez has it. They're the ones who did first aid."

"Why would they take it?"

Truly shrugged that it didn't make sense to him either.

The MP crawled on his hands and knees down the rows of cots trying to see if the .45 had been kicked somewhere else. He stood, shaking his head.

I took up a spot on a cot near the rear flap and told Captain Truly to send in those two men; I said I wanted to question them alone. Then I told the MP to wait in the jeep so he wouldn't get wet and to show

Mitch to the tent when he got there.

But before Captain Truly left to round up Baker and Rodriguez, I asked, "How long has your unit been in stand-down?" I'd just come back from Hu, up the road about seventy miles, where I'd been helping to close up Colonel Redding's flourishing black market business, so I already knew that, the week before, "Unruly Truly's" outfit had run head-on into an NVA battalion in that area, had engaged that battalion for hours, and had been instrumental in kicking that battalion's butt.

It was my understanding that this victory was largely due to the captain's tenacious leadership. Immediately following the battle, it was common talk that Truly and Company A had managed to maneuver in such a way as to make the NVA battalion think it was surrounded by four or five hundred GI's, not just a company of a hundred-plus men. This, in turn, bewildered the NVA long enough that artillery from several directions were able to zero in and pound the hell out of them; jets from base camp in Pleiku could come screaming up the valley, dump their loads of napalm and HE on the enemy forces, and return to reload while helicopter gun-

ships armed with forty millimeter rockets and mini-guns could swoop in and mop up.

And because I could see that everyone's infantry gear was stacked near their individual cots, cleaned and ready for inspection, I figured that the entire company was taking a break, standing down. I felt I should offer my congratulations to the captain for pulling off what he'd been able to pull off in Hu.

He smiled a slight, knowing smile and said, "Splitting your forces like I did is not a maneuver you'll find in military manuals, but it worked. It was more or less an on-the-spot decision to get us out of the bad spot we were in. We were the ones surrounded and could have easily been wiped out. But to answer your question, we've been here less than a week.

"This is the closest it gets to R and R for most of these guys. Let me tell you, we just had one foot in hell and came marching back out again. This is a damned good outfit. These are good men here. This is my second tour, and this is the best command I've had, except for Samuelson and Boyer, two of a company commander's worst nightmares. Most commanders get only one dud. How I ended up with two, God only knows. But this outfit knows how to

cover for itself. I drive that into their heads: protect the guy next to you; keep him alive, and he'll keep you alive. Work as a unit. Follow orders. Cover your and your buddy's ass. If everybody does that, we'll all go home alive."

"And PFC's Samuelson and Boyer couldn't do that?" I asked.

Captain Truly snickered, removed his hat and ran his fingers through his wet hair. "They couldn't walk and talk at the same time. Just like you can't teach an old dog new tricks, you can't teach a dumb one *any* tricks. That's why I always left them both back here whenever we went out on recon or S&D's. Safer for them and the rest of the guys."

"So this unit's been out of combat for a week. Has anyone been doing any shooting? Test firing anything? Qualifying for any weapon?" I glanced around at the various sleeping areas.

"No," Truly said. "No reason to. Not since last week."

"Not Boyer or Samuelson?"

"Especially not them. If I could have, I would have taken their weapons away from them. As it is, I told them not to touch their weapons unless they really needed to shoot them or to clean them."

I scanned the small area around Samuelson's cot, feeling

a bit surrounded myself, facing an entire company of men each a possible suspect. All well armed, too. I could see .45's holstered in webbed belts hanging near each platoon member's cot. Every cot except Samuelson's had a pistol near it.

I knew that someone within the command could easily build resentment towards Samuelson—towards Boyer, too, for that matter—for not carrying his own weight. After all, their most recent campaign was not without its costs. This outfit lost some men, good men, friends. Young men. Some no more than boys. Even "Unruly Truly," as cocky and gung-ho as he seemed to be, could easily resent a couple of duds in the face of their losses. Could that be motive enough? I wondered.

This would be a tough crew to break. I knew how camaraderie worked in infantry units. The lives of the grunts were tightly intertwined—to the point of daily life and death dependence on one another—woven closer together than the jungle growth covering the mountains of the Central Highlands. Oh yes, getting something out of these guys might prove difficult.

I thought again about their recent battle; being surrounded.

"Okay, two things," I said, scrutinizing the captain. "One, I'll run some tests on this shell casing to see if it came from Samuelson's pistol, wherever that is. Two, I'm going to run paraffin tests on everyone here. I'll tell you later about what I'll need for that."

"What's a paraffin test?"

I sniffed the empty shell casing again. "A test that picks up fresh traces of gunpowder on the hands of someone who's fired a pistol within the last several hours. It's nearly always accurate."

Truly appeared legitimately confused, shifting nervously from one foot to the other. "Why? I thought—" His voice trailed off.

"You thought it was self-inflicted?"

"Well, yes, frankly, I did."

"Then his pistol should be right here, captain." I pointed at the pool of Samuelson's blood. "Right here. The casing was here. I'd appreciate your not mentioning the paraffin test to anyone. Let me tell them."

He nodded but still looked very uncertain. "You're not saying that—"

"I'm saying that we don't have his pistol," I said sharply. "Now, send in Sergeant Baker and Rodriguez. I'd like to talk with them. And then Boyer."

He glared at me, resting his hand on the butt of his .45.

"You told me on the phone everyone was gathering for a meeting. Were you there with them?" I asked.

"Me? You're asking about me? I hadn't gotten there yet."

"Did you hear the shot?"

"No. No I did not."

"Where were you then, when the shot was fired?"

"I just told you. I don't know. If I didn't hear the shot, how would I know where I was?" Truly answered quickly. Too quickly and too forcefully. A bit too defensively as well.

"I meant when you learned someone had been shot where were you?"

"Coming from the latrine. So I guess I was probably heading for there or was in the latrine when whatever happened happened."

"There you go," I said, not trying to hide my own sarcasm. "See how easy it is to remember when you think about it."

Captain Truly spun around, parted the rear tent flaps, and ducked out.

That left me sitting there by myself staring at Samuelson's blood, which had lost its glisten because it was being absorbed into the wooden floorboards. Obviously Samuelson had been facing the front tent flaps. I listened to the rain pelt the can-

vas while gusts of wind whipped through the open tent.

Mitch came in first.

He tipped his OD baseball cap back so it rested on the peak of his head, drew out an OD hanky, and wiped the drops of rainwater from his forehead. Mitch and I had become close friends over the seven months we'd been there. We'd arrived in-country at Cam Rahn Bay at the same time—same flight over, in fact—processed through orientation at base camp in Pleiku together, and had worked on more than our share of cases together. Recently we'd been talking about going into business together after we left Vietnam and were discharged. His father owned a security business south of Buffalo, and I was from Bradford, Pennsylvania, only fifty miles south of where Mitch grew up in Springville, New York.

Mitch told me Samuelson had died. "He told me he didn't see who shot him."

"He didn't?" It was my turn to be surprised.

"He was sitting on his cot looking that way." Mitch pointed down the tent to the front tent flap. "He said he thought the shot came from outside."

The front flap was the opening nearest the mess hall, only

a few steps away from Truly's tent, and the opening through which Sergeant Baker and Rodriguez and everyone else would have rushed immediately after hearing the shot. Whoever fired the shot took a hell of a risk being seen.

"Did he seem lucid to you?" I asked Mitch.

"Oh yeah. I asked him where he was from, the name of his parents. He told me. He knew what he was saying. And he knew he was dying."

"Any way to determine the distance the shot was fired from?"

Mitch shook his head. "Just too much blood all over his fatigue shirt. They'd already cut it away."

We were standing near the rear flap of the tent. Mentally I measured the distance from the front flap to where Samuelson had been sitting. It was twenty or thirty feet. Twenty or thirty feet across a row of cots with mosquito netting hanging down each cot, making for a difficult shot for anyone who might have just stuck his hand in and fired.

"But he definitely said someone shot him from the front flap and he didn't see who did it? He didn't somehow accidentally shoot himself? Calibre of bullet? Do you know?"

"Someone shot him, yes," Mitch said. "He was clear about that. And we have a .45 slug."

I parted the rear tent flap and studied the landscape outside. In dim, misty light I could see a swampy area near the tent, a low spot in the ground temporarily collecting water. The rain was letting up by then, and I heard the slight gurgle of water as it began to drain from the low spot.

"We've got ourselves a problem then," I told Mitch.

"And that is?"

"Samuelson's pistol is nowhere around, and it looks to me like he kept it in his footlocker. Maybe the guys who treated him have it, but I think they'd have given it to Truly. I found the spent casing near his cot. If Samuelson was shot by someone who just opened the tent flap and fired, what's the casing doing in here? And supposing he wanted it to look like a suicide by using Samuelson's pistol, why not leave the pistol near the cot?"

Mitch grunted. "Someone could have kicked the casing when they rushed in. It would have been lying right near the flap."

"All right. But why use Samuelson's pistol? And where is it now?"

"Stick around here a bit," I told Mitch. "We've got a couple

of people coming in I want to question first. Then we might have to go through the whole company. Could be a long night. What we'll do is this—"

Just then an E-Five buck sergeant, a black man, along with an Hispanic poked their heads through the front flap and called to us down the length of the tent. "The captain says you want to talk to us, sir."

"Whatever you do," I whispered to Mitch while motioning for the two men to come in, "don't question what I'm about to tell these guys. Just go along and agree. I'll explain later."

Mitch nodded and took a position standing to my left as I sat down on the end cot nearest the rear flap.

Sergeant Baker and Rodriguez stood at semi-attention in front of me until I told them to relax and to take seats on the cot facing me. It groaned and creaked under the weight of both men.

"I'm Carl Hatchett with the C.I.D.," I said, "and this is Mr. Mitchley, the provost marshal investigator."

Baker looked at the U.S.'s on our collars where our ranks would normally have been displayed. Mitch was an E-Five; I was a warrant officer, but it helped in most cases not to let that be known. It was particularly helpful when dealing with

and sometimes arresting officers, like Colonel Redding.

Baker's black face was shiny with rainwater. Rodriguez swept thick black hair back over his forehead as both men squirmed a bit before resting their elbows on their knees.

"You guys were the first two here after you heard the shot, is that correct?" I addressed both soldiers.

Baker answered. "Yes, sir, Mr. Hatchett."

Then Rodriguez: "We were gathering in the mess tent. The whole company had a meeting. Captain Truly wanted to go over tomorrow's events with us. Colonel's coming in tomorrow."

"Because of the generator and the wind and rain noise, we weren't sure where the shot came from at first," Baker said.

"It sounded more like the generator backfired," Rodriguez stated.

I sensed Mitch shuffling from one foot to the other beside me as I watched the two soldiers carefully. "How long between when you heard the shot and when you finally found Samuelson?" I asked them.

"Twenty, thirty seconds maybe," Sergeant Baker said.

"Oh, longer than that, Bake," Rodriguez said. "Remember we stood outside the mess tent a bit trying to figure out if it *was* a shot."

"Okay. Okay, maybe a bit longer. But probably no longer than sixty, maybe ninety seconds."

"Did he say anything to you while you were treating him?"

"Nah. Just groaned. Twisting in pain the way a gut shot makes a man squirm. My God, my God, I'm shot, he says. I'm going to die." Baker sucked in some air, then asked, "How's he doing, anyway?"

"He's dead," I told them.

Simultaneously both soldiers dropped their heads so their chins touched the open collars of their fatigue shirts. Both quietly studied their hands. One of them swore.

"When all you guys were in the mess tent waiting for your meeting, was everyone there?"

Baker lifted his head. "That would be hard to say, sir. Obviously Samuelson wasn't. But you know, I'd have never noticed that if we hadn't found him in here."

"Had Captain Truly gotten there yet?"

"No. No, I know *he* wasn't," Rodriguez said. "He was the one we were waiting for."

"How about Samuelson's buddy PFC Boyer? Was he in the mess tent when the shot was fired?"

Both men shook their heads. "I couldn't tell you that for sure," Baker reported. "But

just because I didn't see him doesn't mean he wasn't there. I mean, there were nearly a hundred guys in that tent. Getting pretty stuffy."

"I guess the only ones we know for sure who weren't in the mess tent when the shot was fired were the captain and, of course, Samuelson," Rodriguez said.

I leaned back on the cot, glanced over at Mitch, then asked the two soldiers, "What was Samuelson like? In your minds, did Captain Truly mistreat him or pick on him?"

"Mistreat?" Sergeant Baker repeated. "No."

"Yes," Rodriguez countered immediately. "Yes, he did, Bake."

"The hell he did, Taco," Baker said to his friend. "The captain bent over backwards to watch out for Samuelson *and* Boyer. He never sent them out with us. Why? Because he felt sorry for them. He didn't want them getting killed out in the bush. Or getting one of us killed."

"Bent over backwards?" Rodriguez flashed his black eyes my way and spoke to me and Mitch. "He sure was bent over last week while he literally kept kicking Samuelson in the butt all the way from here to the latrine. Screaming at him and kicking him, humiliating

him. No man deserves that. I don't care how much of a dud the guy is."

"Remember; both these duds are in my squad," said Baker. "I know how frustrating it can get. The captain was just instilling a little brown boot army training."

"That's not training, that's mistreatment. You know it."

Although they disagreed, I could tell it was an amicable disagreement between two good friends. I had been struck by how young both men were, no more than twenty years old, I guessed. But aging fast out here.

"You want someone like Boyer or Samuelson covering your butt?" Sergeant Baker continued. "The captain, as far as I'm concerned, was doing the right thing. Maybe kicking him wasn't right, but he was looking after them."

"What was Captain Truly kicking Samuelson for?" I asked.

"Didn't know how to clean his pistol," Rodriguez said.

"How long ago did this happen?"

"Last week sometime."

"You know, Mr. Hatchett," Baker said slowly and contemplatively, "some guys just aren't cut out for army life, let alone the hell that goes on out in the bush. Both Samuelson

and Boyer ought to have been back at base camp where they would have been relatively safe. Hell, back in the States even. Maybe they should never have even been drafted. So I don't really blame *them*. Samuelson and Boyer I mean. Some guys just haven't got in them what it takes to be a soldier. It's like asking a fat, one-legged man to stand up and dance, to be a ballerina, if you know what I mean. And the captain? Well—"

Rodriguez suddenly reached over and slapped his buddy on the leg. "When Mr. Hatchett here is done with us, let's go grab a beer."

"Just stay in the company area," I told them. "In a little bit Mr. Mitchley and I are going to be running paraffin tests on everyone. It won't take long."

"Paraffin? You mean like wax?"

"It's a test to detect gunpowder on a person's hand to see if we can determine who has fired a pistol recently." I watched both men as I spoke and then slid forward on the cot. "But go ahead and get your beers. We'll be back with you."

The two stood simultaneously and headed for the rear flaps.

As they were leaving, I asked, "Did either of you guys see his pistol lying here near

his cot while you were treating him?"

They stopped, turned, and scratched their heads, considering. "No," Sergeant Baker said. "No. Now that you mention it, I didn't see a pistol. Did you, Taco?"

Rodriguez wagged his head no.

"Maybe Captain Truly has it. After Samuelson was put in the ambulance, the captain chased us all out and more or less kept guard on this tent, keeping it off limits until you got here."

They left then. I knew Mitch wanted to know what was going on, and I was about to tell him when the sorriest looking excuse for a soldier I've ever seen emerged through the front flaps and shuffled sloppily down the tent towards us. I didn't have to read the name tag on his fatigue shirt to know that this was the other dud of Company A, PFC Boyer.

Even through the loose baggy material of his jungle fatigue shirt I could see thick rolls of belly fat folded one on top the other. His shirt was misbuttoned, his boots were scuffed and unpolished, the laces on one flopped loosely. His glasses, slid down his nose, were fogged so badly he had to peer over the rims to see us. The red, youthful blemishes on his face seemed unduly red un-

der the glare of the bare light bulbs. Even his lips appeared fat and lazy, hardly moving when he spoke.

"The captain said you two wanted to talk to me about Sam. How's he doing anyway? All right?"

"PFC Samuelson is dead," I told him as he sat down where Baker and Rodriguez had been sitting. The cot groaned and creaked worse than when it held two men.

"Ahhh, he is not. How is he really?" The beginning of a smile formed on his fat lips, as if he thought we were having some fun with him.

"I just told you, Boyer, PFC Samuelson died on the chopper out of here."

The smile disappeared; a frown and a confused look took its place. "No. No. That can't be." He fiddled nervously with his high school class ring, class of 1969 I noted. He'd graduated from high school less than a year before that day. "Come on. Come on, he can't be dead. You mean like really dead?"

Mitch spoke up forcefully. "Boyer, PFC Samuelson, your friend, is dead. D-E-A-D. Dead. I was there when he died. Now we're here to find out what happened."

Boyer's fat lips parted slightly, and although his eyes widened with disbelief, it was

easy to see that reality was beginning to sink in, paling his face. He bowed his head, put his face in his hands, and began to cry, his shoulders shaking with heavy, wheezing, breathless sobs straining through his fingers.

We allowed him his moment of grief.

When he lifted his head finally, his eyeglasses were askew, and the skin around his eyes was a brighter red than the facial blemishes.

"Are you all right now?" I asked.

He nodded slowly.

"I know you were good friends—"

"The best, Mr. Hatchett. Sam and I was the best of friends. He was the best. I don't care what these other guys thought of him. Or me. I don't care what the captain thought about us, either. I just want out of here. That's all. Out of here. DEROS. ETS. This place is toooooo much."

"Did Samuelson, did Sam, ever mention to you about maybe wanting to kill himself or maybe wanting to wound himself to get out of the army?" I thought I might as well eliminate that angle immediately.

"Sam?" Boyer's face lit with genuine surprise. "Nah. He was like me. We was just going to take what come along. Then

get out of this hellhole. He's really dead?"

"Really dead. Did you hear the shot?"

He paused, trying to remember, then shook his head.

"Then can you remember where you were when everyone was gathering in the tent? Were you in the tent with them?"

"I was outside heading there when everyone came running out."

"You were outside, and you didn't hear the shot?"

He shook his head slowly.

"See anyone run away from this tent?" Mitch asked.

Again he shook his head.

"You ever hear anyone threatening Samuelson?" I asked.

"No. But a lot of guys didn't like him. Or me. I know that to be a fact."

"Did Captain Truly ever threaten him?"

"Not that I ever heard. Kicked him a lot. Kicked him all the way across the company area 'cause Sam didn't know how to clean his guns; didn't know how to break them down."

"What did Sam do after that?"

"What could he do? He was embarrassed, let me tell you. He was real pissed about it. Right in front of all those guys

laughing at him. The captain is just kicking him, yelling at him, 'If it's the last thing I do, PFC Samuelson, I'm going to teach you to cover your butt. Now, cover it, soldier' and he'd kick him and yell, 'Cover it, soldier' and kick him again in the rear. Sam asked me later if I thought he shouldn't report it to the I.G. You know, file a complaint with the Inspector General."

I sat up straight, attentive. "Did he do that?"

"I'm not sure if he did or not." Boyer wiped his glasses on his shirttail. "Sam was mad and embarrassed about it, no doubt about that. He was a great friend, Mr. Hatchett. We was great friends. I can't believe he's dead. He told me not to worry if ever the captain did send us out on patrol or on S&D's. He told me he'd always cover my ass. And I was going to cover his. Just like the captain's always telling us to do. We was going to do that. But we was never given a chance to cover for each other. Never."

And then Boyer made the most honest statement I'd ever heard a guy utter.

"It ain't easy being guys like us. We don't want to be called duds. We can't help being like we are. I just want out of here with no trouble. I didn't ask to come here. I can't think of any

place worse than here. It's just pure hell here."

I watched PFC Boyer wring his hands nervously, the jowls on his fat face sagging into a dead, emotionless expression as he stared toward the rear tent flaps, trying to see outside.

The possibility that Samuelson had reported Truly to the I.G. was noteworthy. It wasn't hard to imagine how someone like Truly would react to being called on the carpet because of a complaint filed by someone like Samuelson. I asked Boyer again about it, but he repeated that he wasn't sure whether Samuelson had gotten around to going to the I.G. or whether, in fact, he wasn't just mad at the moment and then cooled off and reconsidered the consequences.

I couldn't think offhand what I wanted to ask him next, so Mitch took up the task.

"Did you come in this tent with the others after they heard the shot?"

"I couldn't get in. Too many guys gathered around the front tent flap. All I could hear was, 'Samuelson. Samuelson just shot himself, the stupid dud.' And the captain yelling at him, 'What the hell did you do that for, dud?' And then we were told to go into the mess tent."

Captain Truly was hardly being what I'd have called com-

forting to Samuelson, I thought.

"Who told you that?" Mitch asked.

"Captain Truly. He come back out right away, leaving Sergeant Baker and someone else in here to tend to Sam."

"You didn't happen to notice whether the captain had Sam's pistol, did you?" I asked him.

Boyer glanced over towards the rear tent flap again, then up at me quickly. "No. I didn't see nothing like that. Can't find his pistol? He kept it in his footlocker," he offered.

"I've already looked there," I said.

His shoulders drooped to near roundness, and when he slouched, the rolls of belly fat bulged out farther beneath his fatigue shirt. "I can't believe Sam's dead. God," he muttered, then sat there quietly offering us nothing else.

So I said, "Okay, why don't you go back to the mess tent, Boyer, until we're ready to run our paraffin tests."

He raised his head. "What's that?"

I told him about the test. "It'll take a while to set things up," I said.

He stood to leave. I watched the young PFC fiddle nervously with his hands, take a step towards the rear flaps, and then, as if remembering something

he'd forgotten, he abruptly turned and shuffled down the full length of the tent and out the front flaps. I watched him glance down at the pool of Samuelson's blood as he passed it.

When we were alone, Mitch asked, "A paraffin test? Is that for real?"

"Oh yeah," I said. I stood and parted the rear flaps and looked out into the night across the draining low spot of ground near the tent. The rain had stopped completely, but I knew we'd get another downpour by morning. You could set your watch by the monsoon rains.

"Shall I start bringing in the rest of the company?" Mitch asked.

I turned, not feeling very happy about things, feeling pinched into a corner, forced into doing what I didn't really want to do. The war sickened me sometimes. It was a nasty little war made up of nasty little battles, some personal, some against the enemy, some won and some lost, all involving nice young kids, for whom, until 'Nam, the most intense thing they'd ever experienced had been their senior proms. I was more than ready to wash my hands of the whole affair, take my discharge, go home, start up the business with Mitch. But for now? For now,

like the members of Company A, I was bound by duty.

It was duty to his command that made Captain Truly as hard on his men as he was; duty to each other that caused Rodriguez and Baker and the other members of Company A to follow him; it was a sense of duty that most of us in Vietnam had to begin with, in spite of what was going on all across the country back home. Duty and survival were the adhesive holding everyone together.

I was bound by duty, too, no matter what my personal philosophies were, and how they differed with those of the people running the war, to do my job regardless of how reprehensible that duty sometimes could be.

"Nah," I told Mitch. "We don't need to talk with anyone else. First thing in the morning, at first light, before the next rain hits, take a couple of MP's, get yourself some rubber boots, and thoroughly search that swampy area out there. Tell the MP outside to park his jeep near that area and keep it secured overnight."

"For what?" he asked. "What will I be looking for?"

"Samuelson's pistol," I said. "It's the only place it could have been tossed."

"And you don't want to talk with anyone else? No paraffin tests?"

I picked my baseball cap up off the cot, set it squarely on my head, and said as I was getting ready to leave Company A's area, "No. I never intended to test anyone. We're pretty limited over here as to what we can do, labwise. We haven't got the capabilities for any such test."

Mitch was watching me inquisitively.

"That's just something I borrowed from Captain Unruly Truly's military gamebook, an on-the-spot idea. I wanted to make them think we had more behind us than we actually do. It worked for Truly up in Hu. And I believe it worked for us here."

Mitch squinted, still perplexed.

"I'm pretty sure I know who did it. Now, if you can find the pistol tomorrow and with a little luck I can get a confession, we might be able to wrap this up." With that, I parted the rear flaps and stepped out into the wet night air.

Right where I thought it might be, Mitch and the MP's found Samuelson's .45 stuck in the mud about midway across the drained area; a good, hurried arm's throw from the rear tent flaps. As it turned out, we could have probably gotten along without it, since I also

had a confession, complete and voluntary, to go with the weapon.

After turning the pistol over to me, Mitch was called out to an accident in Phu Bien where a U.S. Army jeep had accidentally plowed into a crowd of Vietnamese civilians near the main marketplace. Since no one was killed and only slight injuries were reported, he was back at the MP area just a bit after I had an MP escort the man who shot Samuelson to the chopper pad where he'd be flown back to base camp to face court-martial. From there? Who knew. Dishonorably discharged, perhaps. Possibly Leavenworth. I really couldn't say since the C.I.D. doesn't prosecute, just investigates and reports findings. His fate was in the hands of the officers he drew for his court-martial.

It didn't surprise me that he came to me willingly that morning; it didn't surprise me that he confessed, needing to get it off his chest, while I hurriedly scribbled out the interrogation for the CQ to type up. It was one confession I wish I hadn't had to take. Someone like Colonel Redding you enjoy bringing down, but in cases like PFC Samuelson's death, I wished I'd had the option of just letting the guy go. That

was how discouraging the war had gotten for me lately.

The CQ was just finishing typing when I met Mitch outside the PMO, back from that accident.

"What I want to know is how you knew it was PFC Boyer who shot Samuelson," Mitch said.

"Two things alerted me," I told him. "I knew the guy who pulled the trigger, accidentally or otherwise, had to have left through the rear tent flaps. Everyone else was coming in the front. The shell casing told me he had to have been inside the tent very near to Samuelson when Samuelson was shot. Once outside, I figured, he immediately tossed the pistol as far as he could, getting rid of the only link to the killing. But if you'll recall, Truly, Baker, and Rodriguez all went out the easiest way, the rear flap. Only Boyer made a point not to go out that way. He started to, but changed his mind. I assume because he knew the pistol was out there and his guilt told him to stay away from it."

"Pretty thin, Hatch," Mitch said.

"But most incriminating was that Boyer immediately began to rub the back of his hand when I mentioned the paraffin test and how it would detect gunpowder. Boyer, of all peo-

ple, should have had no gunpowder at all on his hands, should have been the last one worried about it, since he probably hasn't fired his pistol since he's been in 'Nam.

"What threw me off was Samuelson saying he didn't see who shot him. Yet he was shot with his own pistol, which he kept in his footlocker. And the shell casing was right next to his cot. Samuelson's lying is what confused things."

"He was covering for Boyer, his friend."

"Yeah. It seems Truly's training had sunk in after all. It would have worked, too, if Boyer hadn't overlooked the casing. But there you have it, a piece of physical evidence flying right in the face of Samuelson's statement. Once I came to grips with the fact that Samuelson might have been lying to cover for someone, it all fit into place."

The MP CQ stepped out of the PMO tent flap and handed me the typed version of my interview with Boyer.

"What happened?" Mitch asked.

"What happened? What happened is this."

I flipped through several pages, past the parts where I advised Boyer of his rights; past the preliminaries, and read:

"Hatchett: Would you tell me exactly what happened, PFC Boyer?

"Boyer: Sam wanted to clean his .45 for the inspection the next day. But he still didn't know how to break it down. He was afraid of what Captain Truly would do. He handed it to me. Loaded. I didn't know it was loaded. It went off. It just went off. What's going to happen to me?

"Hatchett: That's not up to me, Boyer. What happened next?

"Boyer: He rolled off the cot, looking real scared. I was going to help, but he said not to. He said, take the pistol and throw it away and get out of there. I said, I can't leave you, Sam. He said I'd be in deep trouble if Truly found out I done this. He said get out, don't say nothing. He'd cover for me, just like the captain was always telling us to do. And he did. I didn't know he was going to die.

"Hatchett: Then you ran out the rear flap before anyone got there and threw the pistol into the swampy area?

"Boyer: Yes. I threw the pistol as far as I could. I didn't care where it went. I didn't ever want to see it again. I

didn't ask to come here. Am I going to be sent to prison? To Leavenworth? That's worse than here, the guys are telling me. It was an accident. I wish I was dead. I wish it was me that got shot and not Sam. I can't go home like this, disgraced. If I am going home."

I flipped the pages of the interrogation closed and said to Mitch, "There you have it. The who, what, when, where, how, and why with a whole lot of remorse."

"Will they send him to Leavenworth? He'll never survive that."

"They might. They have to do something. As you know, unlike in civilian life, discipline is an everyday fact of life in the military. And military discipline sometimes goes hand in hand with punishments. Without discipline the whole structure crumbles."

"It doesn't give them or him many options, does it?"

"No, it doesn't. Couldn't get much more depressing."

Or so I thought.

The MP CQ poked his head out of the tent flap again. His face was blanched a pale white, and he leaned his head against the canvas, looking tired. "Base camp just called, Mr. Hatch-

ett," he said slowly. "On the flight to Pleiku, PFC Boyer somehow managed to slide past the MP escorting him, and then right past the door gunner. He jumped out of the chopper when it was about a thousand feet off the ground."

I could feel my face cool quickly from the blood draining, leaving me feeling like a part of me had just died. Boyer was right. He hadn't asked to come here; hadn't joined the army voluntarily. He could have dodged the draft, like so many others were doing, but he didn't. And he paid the price for it, like any soldier knows he might have to one day. He wasn't a criminal, that was for sure. Boyer's only crime had been that he didn't fit in. I

couldn't help wonder how many other Boyers and Samuelsons there were out there.

For a lack of anything else to do or say, I scanned the MP company area, across the sandbagged walls, the sandbagged bunker, down towards the company latrine where a detail of men were burning the human waste collected during the night, pouring fuel oil into the halved fifty-five gallon drums, stirring it around, and then lighting it. Thick, oily, pungent smoke rose from the burning mass.

"You know, Mitch," I said finally, watching the black, smelly smoke of human waste burning and drifting skyward, "I'll be glad to get out of here. Sometimes this war stinks to high heaven."

THE HAUNTING OF TERRANCE HOUSE

Judith L. Post



“Hey, girly, we need some service.”

Loretta Lapley glanced at the small whitehaired woman at the back of the office, hoping she'd handle these clients, but

Maude Morrell only rolled her eyes and encouraged Loretta on. She'd had her fill of rich fat-heads who thought they could prance into a small town and take it over.

“Look here, sweetie, we want

to buy this house. How much do you want for it?" The man thumped the agency's real estate booklet on the front counter, pointing to a picture of a rundown Victorian. A woman in her mid-forties accompanied him.

Loretta Lapley glanced at the book, then back at her boss. "Maude, it's the Terrance place."

"It's in horrible shape," Maude called from her desk. "We'd strongly encourage you to look at something else." That said, she went back to her paperwork.

"This is what I came to buy, and this is what I'm going to buy," the man insisted, glaring at Maude. "Get off your duff, old woman, and draw me up a bill of sale."

Maude Morrell's dark eyes glittered dangerously, but she stayed where she was. "Loretta, why don't you explain the house's problems to this gentleman?"

"It really is in terrible shape," Loretta hurriedly began.

He cut her off. "Any fool can tell that from the picture. You couldn't have made the place look worse."

Its front porch sagged on the east side. Faded green shutters hung at odd angles at its long, narrow windows, and a

wrought-iron balcony off a second story window was rusted, dipping forward precariously.

"There's another problem," Loretta said.

He interrupted her again. "You're going to tell me that an old geezer like me didn't want to cash it in inch by inch from cancer and hanged himself from a rafter in the family room. Now everyone thinks the place is haunted. The last owner stuck it out two months before the ghostie chased him off."

Loretta gazed at him in confusion, then looked to his companion for help. "We have other old houses in perfect condition we can show you. I know there are people who don't believe in ghosts, but the truth is, some very strange things have happened in Terrance House. We can surely find something else your father would like."

The woman gave a grim smile. "My husband and I are both interested in supernatural phenomena. We picked Terrance House for the very reasons most people would find it unappealing."

A blush tinged Loretta's cheeks. "I'm really sorry . . ."

"No harm done. It happens to Farley and me all the time. I had the unfortunate luck of falling in love with an older

man." She smiled. "A much older man."

Farley nodded amiably. "No woman could get her claws in me until I met Elizabeth. I'd always stayed two steps ahead of them, but she just bowled me over. Knows everything there is to know about ghosties, and I'm nuts about that stuff." He chuckled. "Believe me. At my age, it was definitely her mind that attracted me, not that her body's all that bad."

Loretta stammered incoherently, not sure how to respond. Elizabeth Hansom was a singularly attractive woman, with long auburn hair and lustrous gray eyes. She was tall and solidly built, with an hourglass figure.

"This house fascinates us," Elizabeth explained. "It's as if we'd been called here. The minute we saw it in the listings, we knew we had to own it."

If anything, her words made Loretta more uncomfortable. She glanced again toward Maude for backup. "But you do understand the dangers?" she persisted.

"We're not morons," Farley huffed. "And we're not made of the milkwater stuff of its last owner. No ghost is going to chase us from our home."

Maude Morrell finally rose from her desk. Gratefully, Loretta retreated out of her way.

"I'd hardly call Byron Sanders a milquetoast," Maude informed him. "He fell in love with Terrance House, too, and tried to stay there even after he realized he was sharing it with a ghost."

"What drew him to the place?" Elizabeth asked, bewildered, as she studied the picture of the dilapidated Victorian. "I mean, it does look awful."

"The property—three acres, beautiful landscaping. Its previous owner . . ."

"The guy who copped out?" asked Farley.

"James Terrance had a love of gardening," Maude said. "He planted trees and bushes that are rare in our region, and they're all thriving. Byron took one look at it and wanted to stay. And I have to tell you, that young man had a tremendous amount of energy and vigor."

"Vigor isn't the same as guts," Farley noted.

Ignoring him, Maude continued. "As Loretta mentioned, a lot of strange things have happened in that house."

Farley laughed. "I'm sure of that."

"Byron enjoyed the ghost at first. He thought that cups and saucers floating around one's dining room added an intriguing atmosphere to an old house.

It wasn't until a fireplace poker whizzed directly at his head that he began to think his ghost might be treacherous."

"A poltergeist," Elizabeth breathed. "Did it ever perform in public, or was it only active when Byron was alone?"

"I was at a party at Byron's one night," Loretta said, "and the living room was full of people. All of a sudden, the punchbowl hurled itself straight at Byron. Another time, a fork flew straight at his throat."

"Interesting." Elizabeth's eyes shone with excitement. "And it never bothered anyone else?"

Loretta shook her head. "Only Byron, and the attacks kept getting worse and worse."

"What do you mean?"

Clearing her throat delicately, Maude said, "Byron began to suspect that the ghost was trying to possess him. You see, James hadn't been happy about dying so young..."

"Mr. Terrance was young?" Elizabeth interrupted.

Maude smiled. "He thought he was, only sixty-three. He wasn't ready to depart this earth yet."

"And he tried to possess Byron Sanders?"

"That's what Byron thought. He was beginning to have trouble sleeping in the house. He kept waking up, chilled to the

bone. One night he woke with a violent start, only to find James half out of him, half in. That was the last night he spent in Terrance House. He jumped from the bed and drove into town. He wouldn't even go back to the house to pack his things. Loretta and I did it for him."

"Wonderful!" Elizabeth had a notebook open and was scribbling down everything they'd said.

Farley poked her in the ribs. "Sounds like we've got a live one here, huh, Liz?"

It seemed like an odd choice of words to Maude, but she returned to the main issue. "The point is, Terrance House could very well be dangerous."

"All the better," Farley laughed. He pulled out a checkbook. "We'll take it."

"No."

He stared at her. "No?"

"This is my agency, and we do things my way. Everyone. Even you. If you're interested in the house, first you have to take a look at it."

"Fair enough. We can do that, can't we, Liz? So shake a leg, old lady, and drive us out there."

Maude let the "old lady" pass. She was probably younger than he was, and she was in just as good shape. With her snow-white hair and dark brown eyes, some widowers

found her very attractive. This old coot might want to pretend he was a youngster, but she didn't. She'd earned every white hair on her head, and she was proud of it.

"All right then, let's go." She led them to an olive green Jeep parked at the curb. "I might as well fill you in on the details on the drive out there. Terrance House is about ten miles out of town. James Terrance's father built it. James was born there, and he died there. That's the way he wanted it. The house has four bedrooms and a bath on the second floor, and a third floor study. The ground floor has a large living room with a fireplace, a dining room with a fireplace, and a huge kitchen with..."

Farley interrupted. "Let me guess. A fireplace."

"It's Victorian, after all, with the usual gables, turrets, and lacework—all in need of repair."

"If this James Terrance loved the place so much, why'd he let it fall apart around his ears?"

Maude shrugged. "James's family owned a construction company. He'd helped build and remodel houses from the time he could hold a hammer. The last thing he wanted to do when he got off work was fix his own house."

"How could his wife stand it?" Elizabeth asked.

"James was a lifelong bachelor."

"A bachelor," Elizabeth said; "that explains a lot."

"Byron Sanders had begun rewiring the house himself," Maude continued, "and he'd replaced most of the galvanized plumbing with copper, so some walls are ripped out and the house is a mess."

"A good start until he let a ghostie chase him away." Farley laughed.

Maude swung into the gravel drive that led to the house a little too sharply. "You certainly don't mind badmouthing people you've never met, do you?" she snapped.

"He packed up and ran, didn't he?" Farley countered.

"Not everyone is fascinated by the prospect of being possessed." She pulled up beside the front door and shut off the engine. Motioning to the house, she said, "Not very appetizing, is it?"

From the look on Farley's face, he agreed; but Elizabeth was jumping from the Jeep and hurrying to the wide verandah that hugged the front of the house. Its floorboards sagged and groaned as she crossed them. "It looks exactly like the haunted houses they show in movies. It's too much of a cliché

to be true." She unzipped the monstrous pouch she carried as a purse and pulled a rectangular black box from a deep pocket.

"A ghostie remote," Farley explained.

Elizabeth waited for them to join her before plunging into the empty foyer. "Actually, it measures clusters of energy. If there's a ghost lurking somewhere in this house, we'll find it. I hope."

"We'll hunt the ornery critter down," Farley said.

"If he lets us get close enough. If he's shy at first, and some ghosts are, he'll hide until he's brave enough to meet us."

Maude couldn't recall a time when James Terrance had been shy. Quiet, maybe. Occasionally secretive. But never shy. She thought that Elizabeth and Farley might be vastly underrating the slyness of their supernatural guest. But they could find that out for themselves. She was only trying to do her job.

Leading them from room to room, she had to wait in each while Elizabeth turned slowly, aiming her "ghost remote" into every nook and cranny. "Watch the stairs," she warned as she started to the second floor. The old oak banister creaked menacingly, and the stairs protested loudly.

"Pitiful," Farley complained.

"It gets worse," Maude promised.

"Nothing could be worse than that damned kitchen," Farley said. "Hell, no one's seen an enamel sink like that since the days my granny made lye soap on her wood-burning stove."

"I warned you," Maude said.

They stopped in stunned silence at the sight that met them at the top of the stairs. Wallpaper drooped from bulged drywall in the hallway.

"A water leak," Maude explained.

The wooden floor had buckled in a few places, and three of the bedrooms hadn't seen new paint for decades.

"A stinking disaster," Farley grumped.

Elizabeth hardly noticed. She barely took her eyes off the needle of her ghost gadget as she walked into each room and circled it slowly. When she reached the last bedroom on the left, she gave an excited yelp. "There's lots of energy in here."

Farley and Maude followed her, gazing around the bare room at blank walls and an empty closet. Maude looked out the long narrow window at the rear yard with its many flowerbeds and carefully arranged landscaping. Nothing of James remained here except his view.

She tried to feel his presence as the needle on Elizabeth's gauge bounced around crazily, but if James was hanging around, she couldn't sense him.

"Is he here or not?" Farley asked.

"No, there's a strong energy field, but I think it's because this must be one of his favorite spots in the house. I'd say he spends more time here than anyplace else, but I don't think he's here now. Of course, once I get my other equipment, I'll be able to tell more."

Farley reached into his pocket and took out his checkbook. "We've played fair and square. We've come out here with you and seen the place. Now can we buy it?"

"It's fine with me," Maude said. "I just don't want any problems later on."

"Like what?"

She sighed. "I can't tell you how many folks from the city move here, thinking they'll love the nice, quiet pace of a small town. They settle in, though, and they're totally lost. They've lived in apartments all their lives, so they don't know how to fix the simplest thing—"

Farley met Elizabeth's eyes. "Guess she has me there, huh?"

Maude cringed. "You're moving into a fix'er-upper and you don't know how to fix anything?"

"I'm good with tools," he protested. "I've built lots of things. I've just never had to fix things. Lived in an apartment, you know."

Grimacing,— Maude said, "When you have to pay someone else instead of doing it yourself, you've probably doubled your expenses."

"Money is no problem," Farley assured her. "I can write you a check for this place on the spot and get someone to teach me the ropes later."

Maude shook her head. "Hey, if a city slicker wants to empty his pockets for me, that's fine," she told him.

Farley laughed. "You're a tough old broad, aren't you?"

"I'm no older than you."

"But lots wiser, huh?"

"You said it, not me."

"How long do you give us?"

"If I told you, you'd stay a few more months just out of pig-headedness."

"You've got me pegged wrong, missy. I'm no quitter. Once I sink my teeth into something, I stay with it. Nothing can pry me loose."

"James was like that," she told him. "He loved a good fight. When he hanged himself, I think he did it partly so the cancer couldn't have everything its own way."

"I'll look forward to meeting his ghost, then, because we in-

tend to stay." He opened his checkbook. "Let's make it official."

Maude saw Farley only occasionally in the next few weeks, and every time she saw him, it worried her more. The man was losing weight fast, and his hearty gruffness was quickly deteriorating to temperamental crankiness. James had been like that near the end, until a moody sullenness had settled over him, and then depression.

"Are you moved in now?" she asked him when she saw him at the local hardware store. "Got everything in place?"

"The only thing set up is Elizabeth's damn equipment," he grouched. "Our furniture's come, and a mountain of boxes, but she's hardly unpacked anything. She's spending all her time doing research."

"Trying to track down James?"

"Oh, that's no problem. James is always underfoot. No, Liz is keeping charts on how much energy he gives off, his activity peaks and lows, all sorts of crap, to see if he's changing with time."

"And is James changing?" she asked.

"He's becoming a real pain in the ass," Farley said. "He's nuts

about Liz, but he hates my guts. And the truth is..." He hesitated, then blurted out, "My damn wife loves a ghost more than she does me."

Maude tried to be diplomatic, even though she didn't like what she'd heard. Not one bit. "Elizabeth is awfully serious about her research."

"It's almost as if I'm only some kind of bait," Farley said. "She loves it when the damn pest throws forks and knives at me."

"What about..." Maude couldn't hide her concern.

"No," Farley answered her unspoken question. "James doesn't much favor seeping into a body that's older than the one he left."

"I guess, in a way, that's good."

Farley grimaced. "There's always the good with the bad, right?"

As she watched him leave, she decided she'd have to drop by Terrance House sometime soon. She always liked to check up on her clients, and she wanted to visit Farley before he looked any worse.

When she returned to the office that afternoon, she went straight to her desk and began making phone calls. The more calls she made, the more she worried. Farley Lawford was a

rich old man who had more money than sense, it seemed. Elizabeth Hansom had met him and marched him down the aisle five months after their first dinner date. Not long after that, they'd begun their search for the perfect haunted house. It seemed to Maude that they'd married more to share an adventure than to share a life.

Maude's gut instinct had never failed her yet, and this time around, it was telling her that Farley Lawford was an overgrown boy who'd never admit that he was in over his head. Maude had met lots of men like that. Usually their wives kept them on a close leash. The problem was that Elizabeth was more interested in a ghost's bumps in the night than any squeaks their own bedsprings might make.

Farley hadn't exaggerated. Elizabeth had equipment set up everywhere. Furniture was scattered carelessly about each room, but no attempt had been made at redecorating or even making the house more hospitable.

"It's simply remarkable," Elizabeth told Maude, leading her to the kitchen at the back of the house. "James is everything a researcher could ever want a ghost to be. He's active, opinionated, and forms close bonds to one person. He's not

much of a mixer. He makes one favorite and doesn't like to be bothered by anyone else."

That was an apt description of the James that Maude had known, all right. "Is he being a good host, then?" she asked. "Or is he being naughty sometimes?"

Elizabeth laughed. "I'm afraid James is more like a poltergeist than a regular ghost because he's always up to mischief."

That wasn't at all like the James that Maude had known and loved. He didn't enjoy big social gatherings, but he'd always been civil when push came to shove. Maybe death affected a person's personality somewhat. James hadn't been one bit positive about the idea of dying. After all, he'd committed suicide because he thought God was bungling it and taking too long.

"Do you see James often?" Maude asked.

"All the time. Come help me in the kitchen," Elizabeth invited. "Maybe he'll show up."

And sure enough, while Elizabeth made tea and set store-bought cookies on a tray, cups and spoons started dancing across the countertop, sort of like a Disney cartoon. It startled Maude at first, but Elizabeth thoroughly enjoyed it.

Finally Maude looked around the room and said, "James? Are you there?"

"Were you close friends?" Elizabeth asked.

"Very close," Maude told her. After Nate had died and Maude was all alone, she and James had spent more and more time together. It was hard to keep secrets in a small town, but they'd kept their relationship pretty private.

"What was he like?" Elizabeth asked.

How could Maude answer without revealing how close she and James had really been? "Your Farley reminds me a lot of James," she finally said. "James was a rough-and-tumble businessman, a little bit robust, a lot opinionated, but always sweet. He had a heart of gold. He might make a lot of noise, but that's all it was. Hot air. A pussycat underneath."

Elizabeth nodded. "Maybe that's why I feel so close to him."

Maude looked around the house, frowning. "You haven't even begun to unpack. Are you planning on staying?"

"Oh yes. Things will settle down soon, then I'll get busy. I know it upsets Farley, but I never thought I'd get data like this. It's beyond most researchers' wildest dreams. But I'll come back to the real world

eventually, and then I'll wash glasses and put them in cupboards and do all the other things we need to do to make this house a home."

Her words rang false. It was only a feeling, but Maude wasn't wrong very often. She nodded obligingly, but Elizabeth, she thought, was feeding her a line. Something was wrong, but she didn't know what it was.

“So what do we know about Byron Sanders?” Maude asked

Loretta when she returned to the office.

"Byron? He fell in love with Terrance House—"

"A real coincidence, don't you think?" Maude interrupted. "Since it was so rundown and inconvenient?"

Loretta frowned. "You know, I wondered about that. I mean, I know the property is beautiful, but Byron didn't strike me as the country type."

"Exactly," Maude said. "What did he do before he came here?"

"I think he had some kind of exotic job, maybe on the West Coast."

"California?" Maude asked, surprised.

"Hollywood, I think. He didn't say much about it, but

one day, when I was at the house—”

She hesitated, embarrassed, but Maude let it pass. If Loretta had been infatuated with a handsome newcomer, who was she to condemn? The girl was pretty enough. She was just too damn serious and shy. If a Byron Sanders could pull her out of her shell, good for him.

“—he got a telephone call,” Loretta continued. “His voice dropped so suddenly, I found myself straining to hear. I wouldn’t have paid any attention if he hadn’t sounded so secretive. Anyway, I’m almost positive the call came from California.”

Maude paused, considering. “I wonder what he did there.”

Loretta had opinions about that, too. “I think he might have worked in films.”

“As an actor?”

“Behind the scenes, from what I could tell,” Loretta paused. “You’re probably going to do a background check on him, aren’t you?”

Maude looked at her, surprised.

“I would if I were you,” Loretta said. “It’s a little bit *too* much of a coincidence, isn’t it, that first Byron fell in love with a house he’d never seen, and then Elizabeth Hansom felt pulled here? You’re probably

going to check on Elizabeth, too. And you know, I’ve been thinking more about Byron.” She hesitated, fumbling for words. “At the time, I thought he’d taken a special liking to me.”

“He certainly seemed to enjoy your company,” Maude agreed.

“But if you were a stranger in town and wanted to dig for information fast, who could tell you more than a real estate agent who’d lived here all her life?”

“Did Byron dig for information?” Maude asked.

“Well, he was so smooth it was hard to tell,” Loretta said. “But he’d invite me to his place a lot. He said he felt comfortable with me. And we’d spend an afternoon digging in a flowerbed or knocking out drywall, and we’d talk. Somehow or other, the talk always ended up being about James. I thought it was just because Byron lived in James’s house, and because he was beginning to think it was haunted, but now I wonder.”

Maude smiled. Small towns didn’t have many rubes. City folks only wished they did. “You think Byron was using you?”

“I do now.”

Maude put an arm around the girl’s shoulders. “Not every

man who flirts with you is going to be like Byron."

Loretta grimaced. "I was easy prey for a little flattery and attention."

"That's only because you never go out and have fun. No Prince Charmings make housecalls like they do in the fairy tales. But first things first," she said, changing the subject. "We need to find out about Byron and Elizabeth. Where should we start?"

Loretta brightened. "I have an idea about that, too. We can make the usual phone calls, of course; but I have a friend who works as a dispatcher at the state police post in Glenview. She and I have known each other since grade school. If I drove over there and asked her for a favor . . ."

"It's worth a try. Take the afternoon off and see what you can find out. I'll man the phones." Maude waited for Loretta to leave, then settled down to serious work.

By the time Loretta returned later that evening, both women wore triumphant looks on their faces.

"You first," Maude said.

"Byron Sanders is a special effects artist in L.A. He took two months off between movies to 'visit family in the Midwest.' He had no intention of moving

here. He had two months to buy Terrance House, convince everyone it was haunted, and leave."

Maude laughed. "Well done! Now tell me about Elizabeth."

Loretta's sparkle faded. "You already know."

"It's important to combine our information. You might have learned something I didn't."

Smiling again, Loretta said, "Elizabeth was a makeup artist on the movie sets before she moved to New York, took a few quickie courses in paranormal phenomena, then met Farley at a gathering for people with an interest in the Unknown."

"After which," Maude added, "she looked up everything she could about him and made herself into exactly what would attract him. Now, how do you think they picked Terrance House?"

"First of all," Loretta said, "it was in the Midwest, where no one would know them. They could come here, do their routine, and get chased out by the ghost, and no one would wonder where they went or what they'd do—at least, not for very long."

"Okay, I'll buy that. But why here?"

"Because James made the headlines when he left all of his money to cancer research but

the insurance company didn't want to pay up because he was a suicide."

"That made national headlines?" Maude asked.

"It was a slow news week," Loretta said.

Maude arched a questioning brow.

Loretta's smile was shy. "That's what Dean told me when we went to the news office to look it up."

"Dean?"

"He's the nice state trooper who helped me with this case. Amanda introduced us. She said he was a little too shy and quiet for her."

Maude shook her head. The Fates never failed to amaze her. "All right, we've dug up all this information, and things don't look good for Farley. What did your Dean suggest?"

"That's the bad part," Loretta confessed. "No harm has actually been done, so there's really nothing the police can do."

Maude chewed her bottom lip, thinking hard. "If they can't prevent a crime from happening, maybe we can."

"What do you have in mind?"

When Maude told her, Loretta grinned from ear to ear. "Let's do it," she said.

Maude gazed at her, surprised. She'd never known the girl had so much spunk. It was

strange. Maude had known Loretta for most of her twenty-three years. She'd eaten dinner with her family and watched her grow up, but she'd never seen this side of her.

"How are we going to get Farley to help us?" Loretta asked.

"He'll help," Maude assured her. "Farley's a fool, but he's a smart fool. He'll see how things add up."

A few days later, Loretta called Byron Sanders in Los Angeles. "Byron? This is Loretta Lapley, the real estate agent who showed you Terrace House."

"Yes, Loretta. How nice to hear from you. How's the old 'haunts'?" He chuckled at his own wit.

"Not so good, I'm afraid. That's why I'm calling. A couple bought the house after you left it . . ."

"You did tell them it was haunted, didn't you?"

"Oh yes, we did our best to discourage them, but they *wanted* a house that was haunted. The wife was doing research on the supernatural."

"She found the right place. Old James should give her a run for her money."

"He did more than that," Loretta confided. "He threw her down the cellar stairs."

"What?" There was a sudden urgency in his voice.

"She's in critical condition right now, and the only thing she keeps repeating over and over is your name. We thought maybe she thinks you know something about the ghost that might help her."

There was a long silence. "I'm going to hop the first flight and come out there. Maybe I can be of some help. I'll call the minute I get in."

"Thank you, Byron. We knew we could count on you." Loretta hung up the phone and nodded to Maude and Farley. "He's on his way."

It was after ten when Byron burst through the front door of Terrance House. His eyes scanned the somber trio who talked in hushed tones in the front parlor.

"Where is she?" he demanded. "Where's Elizabeth? I tried to call the real estate office, but the answering machine said you were here."

"Elizabeth's gone," Farley told him. "You're too late."

"Gone?" He gazed numbly at the dark attire they were wearing.

"James killed her."

"You killed her, you mean!"

"James pushed her down the cellar stairs," Farley hissed.

"James hasn't been very happy lately."

"The hell he hasn't. There is no James, and you damn well know it."

Farley didn't say a word. He only stared.

In a rage, Byron crossed to a wall stripped down to its two-by-fours. He pointed to his new wiring, then ripped it out. "See?" He yanked a miniature projector from behind the baseboard. "There's your ghost. It's all a trick. The floating silverware, the noises, the vague images . . . James is nothing but a mirage I invented. Special effects don't kill a person."

As he spoke, the others looked toward the darkened staircase that led upstairs. Dean Thorn, in his state trooper's uniform, came down the last few steps and entered the parlor. He held a tape recorder in his hand. "Would you mind explaining why you went to so much trouble, then?"

Dazed, Byron stopped to catch his breath. "What is this? I don't understand." He glanced to Maude for help.

"The wrong person fell down the stairs, didn't she? The ghost was supposed to kill Farley, then you and Elizabeth would be rich."

"Is Elizabeth . . ."

"Farley sent her on an errand to fetch more ghost equip-

ment," Maude told him. "We had a neighbor go along to help, just to make sure she didn't try to call you or double back and kill her husband."

The fight suddenly left Byron, and he sagged onto a nearby chair. "I told Liz it wouldn't work, but she was tired of being around money all the time and never having any of it."

He was talking to an unsympathetic audience. "I had to work for every penny I ever got," Maude snapped.

"So did I," Farley said.

Byron folded, bending forward and burying his face in his hands. "What now?"

Dean looked at Farley. "Sir?"

"I don't want anything to do with either of them. I want to wash my hands of both of them."

"You could press charges."

"What for? Trying to scare the crap out of an old fool?"

"Attempted murder."

Farley shook his head. "I was damn stupid. A young woman told me what I wanted to hear, and I bought it—lock, stock, and barrel. No, all I want is to be rid of her. A quickie divorce." He glanced at the tape recorder. "And no alimony. She wouldn't dare."

"If you're sure . . ."

Farley looked at Byron. "Get your worthless ass out of here,

and don't come back. Find that scheming minx you run with, and tell her to hightail it out of my sight. If I see her . . ."

He didn't have to finish. Byron stood and bolted for the door.

As Loretta and Dean left, Farley turned to Maude. "Bet you're happy."

"Why?"

"You look the type who loves to say I told you so."

"I'm always right. Someday you'll learn that."

"What makes you think I'm staying here? This place is a joke. I'm a joke."

Maude smiled, shaking her head. "You'll stay."

"Why's that?"

"Because you're a lot like James."

"And?"

"He found many things of interest here."

"Were you one of them?"

"Could be." With that, she waved and went to her Jeep. "I hope you're more of a handyman than he was, though," she called as she left.

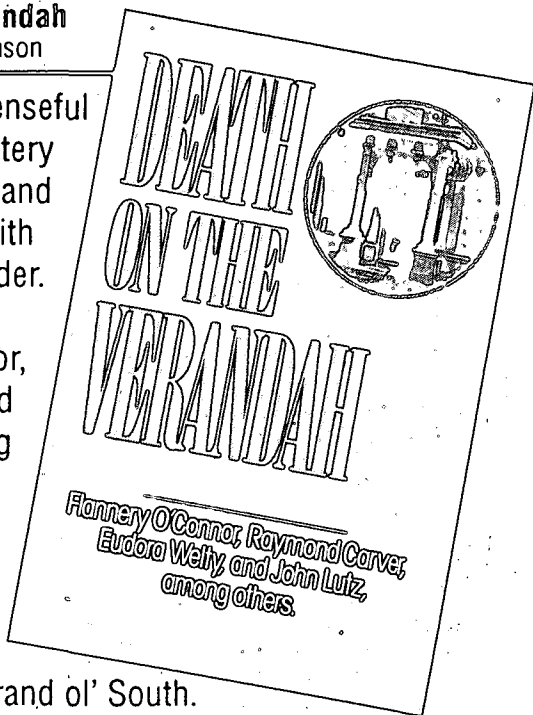
As she rounded the turn in the driveway, she saw him standing at the door, watching her until she reached the turn-off. She smiled. He'd be playing with saws and sanders in no time. A man like Farley couldn't be kept down long.

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Edited by Cynthia Manson

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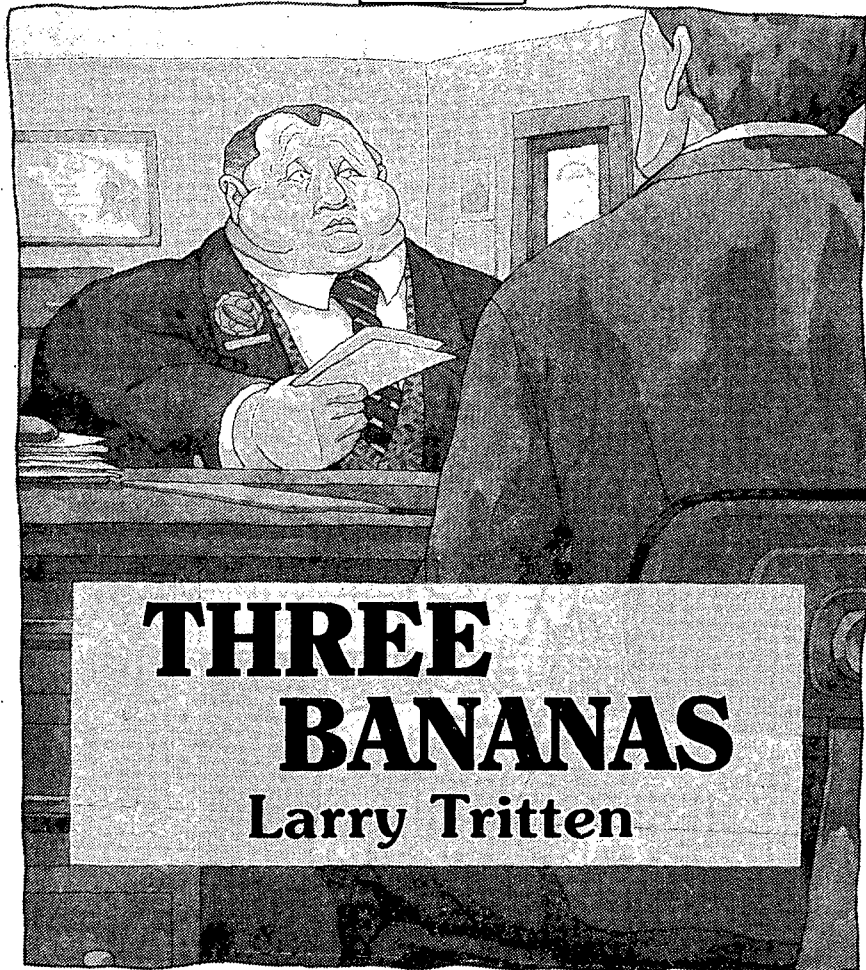
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THREE BANANAS

Larry Tritten

Bananas. Nobody even remembered what they were. That was the ironic part. Banana was a word like “puttee” or “condominium” or “jogging.” It was part of the past. Oh sure, there were a few

oldtimers here and there who dimly remembered them and still made an occasional wistful reference to them, but the word wasn’t really a part of the language any more. The average person wouldn’t have the

slightest idea what you meant if you described Zeon Doon as a top banana or if you said that a disc of dreamol made you go bananas. Bananas had been gone for seventy-five years. All the world's fruit had been destroyed forever in the Wars of Commerce, and the Wars of Commerce were remote history, like World War III^{1/2}, the Oil Wars, or the War of Janet's Pants. Bananas had been a little harder to kill than most of the other kinds of fruit; they had lingered on in a few countries for a couple of years after the initial blights wiped out apples, peaches, cherries, and the rest, but in the end all of it was gone, and it hadn't seemed to matter much, since there were so many new and zany kicks to make up for the loss: a whole spectrum of fulgurant drugs that played the central nervous system like a pinball machine and all sorts of mind bangers and sensibility stingers.

The world had forgotten all about bananas. But some of us were just about to start learning.

It all started with a phone call. It was one of those cold dark San Francisco days featuring a sky the color of wet ashes and the kind of aggressive wind that slaps you around like a sparring partner, and I

was entrenched in my Irving Street office tippling sniffers of rocksauce and trying to forget about unpaid bills and unfulfilled dreams.

The phone rang, and I caught it in the middle of the second ring, not because I had any interest in talking to anyone but because I figured the sound of a ringing bell would be more annoying than someone's voice.

I was right. The party on the other end said something in an undertone so soft and inconspicuous it was like listening to the voice of my conscience.

"You'll have to play that again," I told him. "Then maybe we can turn this into a dialogue."

The voice registered a bit more clearly this time, but it still sounded like someone in the wings delivering a stage whisper. "Is this Rad Sway speaking?"

"It's Sway speaking," I said. "Who's this listening?"

"This is Isham van Bourke," the voice said. It was a hesitant voice, the customary style for clients with confidential stories to tell. A private investigator is a professional confidante, like a priest or a psychiatrist. We all get to hear lots of hair-raising tales about sex and money, the two most favorite topics in every culture sophisticated

enough to have income taxes and birth control.

I waited for Isham van Bourke to tell me something that would stimulate my interest, and he did.

"I would like to retain you," he said, loosening up a little as he forged on. "At your usual fee—uh, whatever that is. . . ."

"That is expenses and ten bucks an hour, cash in advance, no stamps, food coupons, I.O.U.'s, heartfelt promises, or hot merchandise," I said, wanting to get that straight from the outset. I once spent two weeks tumbling down stairs and dodging bullets for a blonde in Mill Valley who paid me in horizontal favors, which was great except that I subsequently had to hock everything but my hat and mattress to keep my practice afloat.

Van Bourke was upset. "I always pay cash," he said quickly and firmly. The knowledge warmed me considerably.

"Do you want to talk about this on the wire?" I asked. "Or do you want to pull your collar up around your neck and meet me in the shadows somewhere?"

"I'll be in your office in fifteen minutes," he said. "If that's all right with you."

"That's fine," I said and hung up. I put away the rocksauce and got up from behind the

desk and walked around the room, checking out the way the office looked. Van Bourke sounded like a man who hailed from green fields, and you had to humor the type, make them feel comfortable so they could throw their money around more easily. I made some neat piles out of a lot of mail and magazines and assorted scraps of paper on my desk, dusted the foundering filing cabinet (termites) against the wall, and turned the radio on low, tuning in KSEA, the station that programs only the sounds of the sea. They were doing the beaches of Southern England, and there were some very nice breakers coming in, perfect for a relaxed mood. I got back behind my desk and cultivated a seasoned and professional look.

I heard Van Bourke coming down the hallway, torturing the antique floorboards with every step, and saw the dark shape of him through the opaque glass in the office door before he knocked.

Van Bourke came into the room cautiously, like a show poodle entering a garbage dump. To say that he was pale and fat would be to understate. He was the color of bone china and too wide to reach around. He got, somehow, into the chair across from me and flashed a tight smile of greeting. He was

wearing a suit the color of dried blood that fit like a tent. On its lapel there was a gold pin: a drumstick crossed with a loaf of bread inside a wreath of sausages, and underneath the phrase *Bon Viand*.

"Mr. Van Bourke," I said and nodded.

Van Bourke nodded. "Hello."

He was going to need coaxing, I could tell. He wasn't used to bringing his dirty laundry into anybody's office. I smiled at him and said evenly, "Why don't you tell me about it, whatever it is, and we can float with it."

That seemed to relax him some. He tilted back in the chair, which made a sound like a cruiser nudging a dock, and composed a melancholy expression.

"I guess I should start at the beginning," he said.

"You could start in the middle—if I were clairvoyant," I said brightly.

He let that pass and let his gaze drift around the office for a couple of seconds and, when he had himself all coordinated, said in a dignified voice, "What I want you to do is check into a matter for me. And I suppose the best way to get at this is to introduce myself first. . . ." He gave me a sudden sharp glance. "I don't happen to look familiar to you?"

"Nope."

He seemed disappointed. "Well, I'm the editor of a magazine, Mr. Sway. I'm sure you've heard of it. *Vittles & Viands*, the magazine of victuals. We're dedicated to presenting a shamelessly gustatory approach to eating—to fine dining, I should say. For us, you see, food is a very serious thing. . . ."

So much I could see by his dimensions.

"Food," he went on, letting the word melt in his mouth like pure ambrosia, "is something I've devoted my life to. It is, you might well say, my vocation, avocation, pastime, forte, and pleasure. If you can understand that, you will be able to see just how important this whole matter is to me."

I nodded, absorbing it and waiting for him to go on. "S & M's?" I said, offering him a package of those little candy-coated chocolate drops, the kind that are stamped with an image of a dominatrix and melt in the hand not the mouth.

Van Bourke waved them aside with a limp gesture and said pointedly, "I should rather talk about bananas for the moment."

"Bananas?" I got a fix on the word, probed the back of my mind for connections, and came up with a dim memory: that

long yellow fruit people used to eat. "Why bananas?" I asked.

Van Bourke eased back in his chair, a smile touching his lips. "Because I think there are bananas somewhere in this city," he said. "And I would be willing to pay a delicious sum to have this investigated. I can't emphasize that too much."

I gave him back his smile. "It sounds more and more interesting."

Van Bourke let his hand slip furtively into his coat pocket, and the pale fingers came out with some photographs that he held low in his lap and facing away from me like a man with a hot poker hand. Then he handed them to me and watched with a troubled expression as I turned them over. They surprised me. They looked like shots from one of those sex dream layouts in one of the better men's magazines—*Playboy* or *Decor* or *Wit & Bawd*: two young women, one wearing nothing but black riding boots and a diadem of gumdrops in her waves of blonde hair and one in a coal-black, skin-tight leather bodysuit with minimal slits for the eyes and a mouth visor, and a man, nude, all tangled together on a bed whose sheets looked like they had hosted a stampee. The photographs were not the best. They had a fuzzy,

unfocused look that made them hard to appreciate.

I put them face up on the desk, one at a time, all five of them, and glanced up at Van Bourke. "Well, you didn't come here to sell these."

"Look at them again," he said.

I looked again, browsing through the background detail this time, then saw what he was getting at. The three revelers were in an expensive king-sized bed with an opulent brass frame that shone like polished gold. In the background was an indistinct wall, colorless in shadow, and the only other thing to see was part of a night stand to the left. There was a phone on the stand and beside it a white dish with something in it. Three long yellow objects.

"Bananas," Van Bourke nodded, tapping one of the pictures. "Here in this dish. You see them, don't you?"

"I see them," I said, "but I'm not so sure they're bananas."

He frowned. His voice became firm. "But they are bananas. I *know* they are bananas. I *believe* they are bananas. *Musa paradisiaca sapientum*—in the peel, by God! I was there in the theater, took these pictures—which are, admittedly, not exceptionally good. But I thought the important thing was to get some-

thing on film before the opportunity passed." His eyes sought mine, and his voice rose with dramatic emphasis. "These pictures were taken in the Calliope Theater. I went back a second night to get them and took five shots off the screen. They lose something in the translation, I admit, but when I was there in that theater seeing them on the screen, they were, I assure you, more palpable and plainly authentic."

I said, "You took these pictures in a porno theater?"

Van Bourke nodded. "I was there the night before last. That's when I noticed the dish. I went back last night with a camera."

I admired his spirit, but I couldn't help thinking about wild geese. My skepticism showed, and Van Bourke nodded knowingly, removing his wallet from his coat and holding it up with some ostentation. "You think I'm eccentric or enigmatic or perhaps just somewhat ridiculous," he said, smiling wanly, "but the fact is I can afford to pay your price, Mr. Sway. I have a fine gourmet's instinct for the near presence of an exotic comestible, and even though all logic, sense, and precedent would seem to dispute me, I am going to side with that instinct. I will

not claim to know how or why there should be bananas in a world that has forgotten the word, but there is something here, something . . ." he paused and stared at the air for at least fifteen seconds before going on " . . . something portentous and quite *important*. . . ."

I took the wallet out of his hand, something he scarcely noticed, and holding it in one hand nudged a thumb into the currency vent until I felt the wad of bills, then flicked three out, glimpsed the denomination, nodded, and said, "I've got to trace a film back to its source. No problem."

Van Bourke shrugged, frowned. "A film with no credits, one that might have been made by any of scores of errant purveyors of the like. It will involve energetic footwork, persistent queries."

"For bananas," I said, deadpan.

"But bananas, by God!" Van Bourke exclaimed with a burst of zeal. "Ah, Mr. Sway, if you could only appreciate this. Do you know that bananas were once as basic to the civilized palate as bread, meat, and omnisweet? The banana was there, *everywhere*: banana bread, pudding, cake, banana cream pie. It was in frozen confections, ice cream, pastries, candy. Liqueurs. They served

banana nirvana at the Hyatt Regency. The flavor was, apparently, exquisitely adaptable. It was, as Andmore Yam says in his *Lure, Lore, and Life of the Banana*, the perfect flavor, and no kitchen or table or mouth went without its grace." He sat up in the chair, and his eyes were wide and clear as he went with the flow. "Can you imagine *tasting* one?" he asked, and sat back with the impact of the thought.

It was a rhetorical question, so I ignored it, tucked the three bills into my shirt pocket, and gave my client the self-assured smile I figured he deserved for his money.

"I'll be in touch with you, Mr. Van Bourke," I told him.

The Calliope Theater was in the Tenderloin on Eddy Street. It was listed under adult theaters in the movie section of the *Chronicle*, and the ad promised a miscellany of "hot holograms, sizzling celluloid, and sexy surprises." It sounded interesting. I drove over there in my old Caravel, found a place to park, and walked two blocks, taking care not to look too hard at a hooker in pearls and a black dress with a mandarin collar and cuffs who trailed me for a while. She looked pretty good.

The Calliope wasn't Loews Colossus. It was a crackerbox of a building that had once been a small shop of some kind. Now the glass doors were painted black and darkly curtained. They opened into a dingy little ticket booth where you bought your ticket, then passed through a turnstile and vanished through curtains into the small screening room where the fantasies were.

I bought my ticket from a dark voice in the ticket booth, went inside, and gave it a chance. A naked blonde with eyes as blue as sapphire ice and blue hair cut short and glittering with iridescent sequins was drifting somnolently above the aisle, reaching down toward the audience, her fingers weaving in the air. It was a vivid fantasy, and when it had run its course, it faded, leaving faded wisps and traces of blue light in its wake. A film appeared on the screen down in front. Two women were coming down a ramp from an ocean liner amid a blizzard of confetti and paper streamers. There was no sound—just the ratchety whisper of the projector unwinding film. The women were very young and at first glance very beautiful, but as they came down the ramp toward the crowd on the dock, approaching the camera in extreme closeup,

you could see that the makeup was laid on so heavily they looked like Fauvist ghouls: eyes the color of steel shadowed with dark purple and grape-colored mouths forcing exaggerated prurient smiles out of faces as pale as chalk and coral. The faces drifted toward the camera and filled the screen, which went black, then phased through six blank squares, each a few seconds in duration, citron, lavender, electric-blue, bright pink, neon green, and cerise, before fading into an image of both of the women, nude and curled into fetal positions, side by side, fused into the center of a great translucent block of some pale gelatinous substance. In the soft green depth one could see very slight signs of motion, a finger, elbow, the stirring of a foot. The camera moved in, and their eyes opened as they peered out in smiling lassitude, lips moving to form mimetic kisses.

Not bad, I thought. Arty.

Then I was watching three people tumbling around on a big brass bed. I tuned into the action very keenly, and when the camera panned past the white dish got a clear look at the yellow objects. I found myself wondering what something that looked that lurid would taste like. Sour? Sweet? Dry? Juicy? I watched for a while as

the blonde with the gumdrops on her skull was being nibbled over by her companions, then got up and went up the aisle and out to where the ticket seller was laying down a game of solitaire. Peering through the glass that separated us, I made out a pair of harsh eyes in a wasted face beneath a lot of slicked-back hair alight with oil. He smelled like a Tenderloin barbershop.

"How's business?" I asked.

His eyes stayed on the cards. No answer.

I tried again. "A rat worked over one of my shoes while I was dreaming in the front row. Who do I complain to?"

He picked up a card and turned it over and when it was down gave me a quick, nasty glance as he turned over the next one. "Beat it," he said.

I lighted a wooden match on the side of the ticket booth, fired a cigarette, and blew the smoke at the glass. "Yeah?"

"Yeah," he said, but there was more irritation than conviction in his voice, and now he sized me up. That gave him the notion to ease up a bit. "Didn't like the show?" he ventured.

"Loved it," I said. "Especially the part where the man in the glass booth realizes just how serious life can be." I backed that up with the kind of expression a barracuda makes biting

into a tin can and tapped the glass a couple of times to make sure he was wide awake. "Who owns this trap?" I added.

"Owns?" He caught his lower lip with his teeth and shot a glance at the stairs going up to the projection room.

"I'm listening," I said.

"You—you got an appointment?" he faltered.

I rapped the glass again, impatiently this time, enough to sit him up straight. He took a deep breath and said, "Ahh—well, Mr. Saracen is upstairs now—but he don't, he—"

I left him struggling with his grammar and went up the narrow spiral stairs in the darkness to the next floor where a corridor led to the projection room and another door at the far end behind which a tinny little radio was blaring out Dry Stone's latest blues tune, "The Prisoner of Brenda."

I rapped the door twice with my knuckles. A voice came back with "Yeah?" in a noncommittal monotone, and I opened the door and went inside.

It was a hot, tight little room with just enough space for a desk and the man behind it. He had a face that a mother might be able to love: a skulker's eyes, a nose that had been broken as many times as an ingenue's heart, and a dull mouth that wouldn't waste much time with

smiles. His desk was littered with papers, and the papers were littered with ashes and covered with coffee stains and chewed-up toothpicks. He was wearing an expensive Scott Lee shingle tweed that was lost on him. He looked surprised to see a stranger, but that didn't change his expression much.

"I don't know you," he said to the wall behind me.

I held out a hand. "Roth Saint-James Place," I introduced myself while he looked over the hand. I was about to put it away, but then he shook it briskly and released it and sat back.

"Barney sent you up here?"

"I found my way. Barney isn't social."

"Who're you?" His gaze was empty, flat.

"Well..." There wasn't another chair, so I relaxed my stance and put the cigarette between my lips, working on a faint smile. "I was watching your program downstairs," I said. "Some very interesting stuff. Not the usual product. I've seen my share of loops, but there's a little something extra there..."

He looked at me with vague curiosity. "Yeah? You a film buff?"

"Writer," I said. "The thing is, I'm doing a rundown for *Light & Shadow* on porn films.

The ones with a little class and style. I'd like to talk to a couple of filmmakers, do an interview or two. For starters, it's pretty clear that whoever makes your loops has got some kind of unique imagination and an attitude toward his stuff that puts him out of the hack league."

"You think so?" he said thoughtfully.

"The style shows through. I'd like to talk to him if it wouldn't be too much trouble."

He considered it and looked annoyed. It would definitely be trouble, his eyes told me—but I sensed that I could ease the pain by making it worth his while.

"I'm a freelance writer," I told him. "I don't make a lot of money." My wallet was in my hand, and he was watching through narrowed eyes as I slipped a bill out. "It's worth a '79 Ford," I said. "Tops." I started to pass him the green, but he had it in his hand with a conjurer's dexterity sooner than I could make the move. He tucked it away in his coat without looking at it and leaned back in the chair to dig something out of his other pocket. He handed me the card, and I held it up to read. There was a name, CINEMAGIC, and a phone number, 347-14-769323. In the upper left-hand corner a mo-

tion-picture camera was spilling out flowers and fruit onto the name and number.

"This nut shoots all my loops," the man behind the desk said. "Nick Malmsey. Good man. Used to be the best cameraman Electropix had working for them till a hologram exploded, iced his eyes out. No depth perception now, but he's got a good mind's eye for composition."

"Thanks," I said. "I'll give him a call."

"He loves to talk," he said, making it sound like a warning.

"Thanks," I said again, and went out and down the corridor. Just to make sure the projectionist was on his toes I rattled the door as I passed by and snarled, "Focus th' god-damned thing!" I could hear him grumbling through the door all the way to the bottom of the stairs.

Outside it was summer on the street. There would be wind on the bay tonight, but the air in the Tenderloin was as thick as a blanket. Neon cocktail glasses hovered in the air in front of all the bars, pouring out their pink and green bubbles, which winked out or floated away as fading scintillas of effervescence. Drifters, panhandlers, dreamers, rumhounds, vags, hookers, prow-

ers, idlers, fixers, and d.p.'s roamed the streets. There was pie in the sky this evening. They'd programmed a slice of vanilla cream and it was drifting in the dark sky over the Embarcadero, a mile-long wedge of phantasmal light, dripping clouds of frosting that dwindled away like vapors. I stood there watching the apparition until I became aware of someone standing behind me and a little off to one side. "Don't turn around," he whispered. "It would be dumb. What you want to do is move down the block . . . the parked Halberd. Get in. Watch the sidewalk. Do it right, and I won't have to do anything dangerous." It was a voice you wouldn't want to debate with.

I walked to the Halberd and opened the door. "You drive," he snapped. I slid over behind the wheel and sat there. The keys were in the ignition. He slid in beside me and sat there with his eyes on me. His smile was civilized, but his eyes might have belonged to a Visigoth. He was wearing a pink shirt with black sharks on it and a pair of white slacks.

"You're smart," he said. He showed me the .45. "Keep smart, stay smart. Or I'll open your breadbox." He kept smiling. "I'll assume you know what a .45 slug can do. That's why

they still make them. And it's all you need, mac. You can keep your .56 Minim, your Belgrade Windjammer, .33 Firebrand, and all the rest."

I nodded sagely.

He ran a paw over my suit and came up with my wallet and my .38. He put the gun in the glove box and looked through the wallet, handed it back.

"A dick. I figured."

"I don't think we've been introduced," I said.

He put his fingers under my chin and turned my face to the side. "I'm not a good audience, dick. I'll rock you." His smile was as hard as the Tenderloin pavement. I got the idea.

We drove, at his direction, across Van Ness and up toward Pacific Heights. The house he pointed out was a big French bonbon with doors and windows and balconies. We went up the flagstone steps and inside. We paused at the bottom of the stairway while he fished a pair of cuffs out of his pocket, shackled one of my wrists, and locked the other around a standing antique iron lamp an ocean liner could have used for an anchor. He went up the stairs.

There wasn't much to look at — just the stairway and another corridor, both lost in shadow. I didn't wait long be-

fore he came back down the stairs. He looked puzzled. He sat on the steps and tossed me the key to the cuffs.

"It's over," he said.

I unlocked the cuffs and stood watching him. He looked up at me and shrugged. "Damn." He shook his head. "Damn."

"I don't get it," I said.

"He's dead, dick."

"Dead." Who's dead? I wondered.

"Never mind." His face was red, and he looked embarrassed. "I got no personal interest in this," he declared. He sat for a while, then said, "Hell, I need a drink. Drive you back downtown if you don't ask any questions."

He drove me back into the Tenderloin. Neither of us said a word during the ride, and when I got out of the car, he put his head out the window and called out to me on the sidewalk, "Stay away from that house. It's hotter than a Death Valley barbecue. . . ."

I waved and said, "Drop me a card."

I watched the car turn a corner and then got in a parking lot phone booth, folded the doors shut, and dialed the number on the CINEMAGIC card. Six rings and I was ready to hang up, but then a tired voice

sighed into my ear, "Yeah, speaking . . ."

"I'm looking for Nick Malmsey," I said.

"Me," he said. "You're lookin' for me. So who's lookin'?"

I told him that I was writing a piece on loops for *Light & Shadow*, that he was an unappreciated Leonardo of the lens, and I was here to put a cornerstone under his name. He was tired, he said, he'd been in the darkroom for hours sifting fantasies out of the tray, but he wasn't too tired to talk to a guest who cared about his work and brought a bottle of tangerine green.

Nick lived out by the ocean on the Sundown side of Golden Gate Park. It was a building that would have made an architect weep. Square, yellow, and dirty. The facade had that eczematous look that old stucco acquires when the seaside winds have worked it over for a couple of decades, the windows were opaque smudges, and the shrubs out in front were stunted and hunchbacked, the deep green worn out of them by windblown sand. There was no bell. I tried the door and found it open, walked up to the apartment, and knocked.

Nick opened the door. He was a slight, polite looking man with a garland of hair on a balding dome. His leather and

velvet jumpsuit, orange and umber, made him seem perhaps a few years younger than he was, but there was a tranced look in his eyes that spoiled the effect.

"Hey, man," he smiled, and slid his palm into mine. "Make yourself homey. Let's drink and talk."

I sat on a couch whose cushions were going slack with age and uncorked the tan, looking about for glasses.

"Hell, let's use the bottle," Nick said, and I knew exactly where he was: a man with no use for pretense.

We passed the bottle back and forth while I asked Nick questions. It wasn't long before he was talking enthusiastically about his work, anticipating the questions and making it unnecessary for me to do anything but listen. He was a man with a craft who was eager to talk about it, to explain the meaning of it, and I felt just a little bit bad about leading him because he was one of those rare people with a genuine sense of excitement.

"So now 'm doing loops," he said wistfully but not bitterly as the level of tan reached the halfway point on the bottle's label. "But I don't shoot 'em and run. I try to keep the scenarios inventive—maybe with a tendency toward the bizarre, the

surreal. And I use beautiful men and women, and costumes, *nice* clothing—chiffon and velvet, floral silks and soft body lights. It's the shine of black leather and mist of pink nylon, the wedding of fashion and sex that give eroticism a flavor of art."

"One of the things I noticed right away about your stuff," I said. "Exotic costumes." I took the bottle he handed me and took a belt. "The model with the crown of gumdrops. Very nice. . . ." I let a thoughtful moment pass and then said, "Where do the models come from? I'd like to talk to one."

"Nara, the one you mention," he said, "is pretty typical. She's twenty-three, experimenting with life. She made a few loops with me last year when she lost her job. Lived with a guy until it went down the tube, filed papers for a while, then back for a few more loops last month."

"Where'd you shoot the one with the brass bed?"

Nick paused. "Well," he said finally, "that one was different. Yeah . . . really. We were all stoned on that one. Shot it at a big pad in Pacific Heights—just the other day. Nara was going with some guy with a lot of dough—name of Domino London. He wanted to watch a session, and he made it worth our while. Turned into kind of a

kink party. Everybody was higher than NASA." He paused, then added, "But that's not common. He made an offer I couldn't refuse, y'know?"

"Money talks," I nodded, sipping from the bottle. I gave it to Nick.

"This guy's money shouts," he said. He upended the bottle and finished the liquor. "You want to talk to Nara?" he asked.

"Uh-huh," I said.

"That's all?" He grinned.

I was turning that one over and working up an answer when he suddenly laughed. "Well, hell, you're human," he said. "Yeah, talk to Nara. She's friendly. Got a sense of humor. She's okay. I'll give you her phone."

He wrote her phone number and address at the top of a page in a book, tore the page out and gave it to me. Page 79 of *Popcorn Epistemology*.

"Practice of mine," he said, "to give a little food for thought with the information."

I folded the page and tucked it away. "Thanks," I said. "I guess it's getting late."

"I'll watch for your piece," he told me at the door, smiling, amiable, pleased to have found a listener.

"Keep up the good work," I told him, feeling like a real son-

of-a-bitch going down the steps.

There was fog in the air but birdsong in the fog as I parked in front of Nara Sands' place the next morning. She lived on the corner of Jackson and Santa Monica in an ultra-chic combination Spanish/Hollywood/Gothic cottage that someone with a vivid sense of exoticism had painted a soft lilac so that it seemed to be seen through a violet filter. The neat lawn was violet as well, and so was everything in the small garden out front; and the papier mâché jacaranda tree that shaded the front door was in full violet bloom. I walked across the pastel scape up to the front door in the fog and rang a doorbell that touched off a quiet chime inside the house.

The door opened, and the woman who looked out at me smiled. Friendly. She was something more than pretty. Lovely perhaps. Her colors were all wintry; long hair so pale it seemed somewhere between the lightest gold and the richest silver, skin the color of pale rose, eyes full of pale blue light. She was as tall as I am and wore an emerald green dress that showed plenty of leg and a cleavage that would dis-

pel any notion that she was shy.

"Hi," she said eloquently.

"Hello."

Her smile stayed put. "Well, you don't look like a *salesman*."

"I tried to call first," I told her. "There wasn't any answer, so I went for a drive—and stopped by."

"I was out in the garden in back," Nara said. "Watching things grow."

"In the fog?"

"Sure." I went inside, and as I followed her through a hallway into another part of the house, she said, "Nick called. So I know about you, in case you're wondering." We emerged in a room whose floor was a white sand beach. A Pacific horizon was programmed on one wall, the water white with reflected sunlight, the day hot. There was a gentle sound of the waves coming in and the cry of seabirds. The only furniture was two big palm trees and a portable bar.

"You don't mind talking out here?" she said, then smiled and extended her hand. "I'm Nara. Anyway, some of the time. Sometimes I do masque films—then I'm Liza Rd."

"What's your real name?"

"It isn't Chastity," she smiled. She met my gaze and held it as her smile defined her

mood. She eased my name out of her mouth. "Rad." Warmly.

I looked around for something to sit on. I needed it. But there was just the beach.

"C'mon, sit," Nara said, taking my hand, and I gingerly eased down beside her on the beach. She took off her shoes and in as much time as it takes to open an eye had slipped herself out of her dress and was stretching her legs in the sand. Every part of her that wasn't concealed by three small triangles of black silk was the color of polished copper. I sat beside her, and she took my hand between hers.

"You don't know what to make of it, right?" she said.

I didn't know what to say.

"Rad, don't say anything," she said. "I know you're not a writer." There was a tremor in her hands. Her eyes darkened, and her smile sank with the light dimming in her eyes. "I'm not so easy," she said, apologizing, and put her cheek on my shoulder. She shuddered, and I held her lightly. Her heart was beating swiftly, and her fingers moved along the edge of my jaw, touching me with trust, seeking something. I grazed my lips through her hair, and she clung. She was afraid and confused, and it was hard to resist the lure of her, so I followed those old instincts and went

with her guidance into the lodes where the gold lay buried. She was all gold, and when we opened our eyes again in the burning sunlight, her smile was placid, she was calm and steady again.

"Want a drink?" she asked.

"Yeah," I said.

She plodded through the hot sand to the bar, and I waited until she came back with two frosted glasses.

"Cheers," she said, touching her glass to mine.

How can I describe that drink? The heavy sweetness of rum flavored with a taste so subtle it seemed to fade the moment it registered. Yet it was strangely . . . memorable.

"What is this?" I asked Nara.

"Banana daiquiri," she said. "Like it?"

I didn't say anything, and after a few seconds her mouth twisted into a flat taut line. "We were like toys to that son-of-a-bitch," she said with sudden anger. "Like those old mechanical banks you put a coin into. Performing toys." She sipped her drink. "He was all hands and ego—push, grab, take. He didn't even know how to play an orgy. Money was all he knew. His idea of sex was using someone—manipulation. There are diamonds in the coal, Rad, moths fly with the butterflies—but he didn't know that.

When he found out he didn't have a couple of slaves, he got pretty weird, ugly. He beat Mustela up, broke her nose. He was like a mad wolf. I hit him with the nearest thing I could find. It was the blender I mixed these daiquiris in."

I was watching her as I listened. She had it all under control now as she went on; there was no regret. "That was a couple of days ago in his place in Pacific Heights. Know what I did with the two bananas we aren't drinking? His priceless bananas."

I shook my head.

"I could've traded them for the Hope diamond," she said, smiling faintly. "Well . . . I took them to the Nicaraguan embassy . . . I would think just in time, too. They were getting brown."

"The Nicaraguan embassy?" I said.

She nodded and said, "I couldn't think of a better place. Mr. Mendoza said they'd be taken care of. That's where bananas used to come from, you know—Nicaragua."

I nodded. "Yeah. I'm wondering how you knew who I am."

"Not who you are," she said. "Who you aren't. When Domino realized that his bananas were on film, film that was being shown, he got a little crazy. He was convinced somebody would

see the film and know what they were seeing. And come looking. It was all an accident. We were all so high on snappers and Immelmans that nobody thought about moving the fruit dish. It was—"she smiled and shrugged"—an orgy . . ."

It all graphed. Londos had his man watch the Calliope to field anybody who might show up with questions about the loop. But when he took me to Londos' house, he found his boss dead, which wrapped it all up as far as he was concerned.

Nara went on, "They belonged to a collector of *objets de fruit*—a wealthy guy whose hobby was collecting art that depicts fruit. He paid him enough to buy a fleet of Ferraris for them. They'd been cryogenetically suspended for seventy-five years. Domino just thawed them a day before our photo session. He was going to put on a yellow suit, drop some wig fizz, and eat them while watching *The Gang's All Here*, that old Busby Berkeley flick with the banana ballet in it. The ultimate trip." She gave

me a curious smile. "And that's it. Except I still don't know who you are. I'd say you're okay. I'm that perceptive. . . . You get that way. . . ." She let the implication fade and her smile stayed put, melancholy, highlighting her beauty like the last rose in a tragic garden.

"I'm a dick on a case," I said. "My client is a gourmet."

"A detective." She said the word flatly and lowered her eyes. "So I guess it's the Big House for me."

I thought about that and chuckled. "Nara, I'm not the law. And insecticide isn't my jurisdiction. I'm a guy trying to make a living. You know?" I crossed the room and stood by the door in the sand, pausing; then went back toward her and reached out and touched her cheek. The blue light in her eyes was bright enough to blind me for a moment. She could be trouble, sure, but then so could anybody. Milkmaids and princesses. We're all people.

"I'd like to see that old Busby Berkeley film," I said. "If you're not doing anything, how'd you like to?"

Company bets everything on \$200 million pair of legs

Breakthrough technique for removing unwanted hair without pain.

In the late '80s, electronic hair removal products appeared in stores everywhere. Women responded with enthusiasm, and by the end of 1989, \$200 million worth of the devices had been sold. Sales soon went flat, however. Most women found them much too painful to be practical. Now Braun, a company with a reputation for quality products, has updated this concept with the new Silk-épil. It promises lasting results and smooth, sexy legs *without pain*. They're betting that \$200 million in sales will be just the beginning.

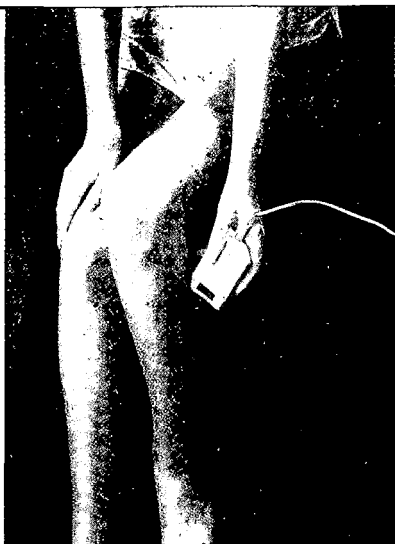
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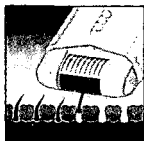
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The Old Way



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FICTION

A DIAMOND'S WAY OF CHANGING HANDS

Martha B. G. Lufkin



Illustration by Hank Blaustein

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“I’m sorry you lost your husband,” Rupus Grady said—not exactly with emotion. The expanse of his forehead remained undisturbed, revealing only that a very large brain operated underneath. “But you’ll have to find a new one now, right away.”

“You told me that before,” his client said. “And both husbands died.”

Under his left wrist Grady made a small movement, the calculated rubbing of a knotty cufflink, a motion he often made while his clients, seated opposite in his sleekly appointed Boston law office, let his tax-saving advice sink in.

“But, Mrs. Brimmer, you must leave your estate to a *spouse*. The marital deduction. If you leave your property to anyone else, you face a pernicious death tax. The law, as you recall, only exempts property we leave to a husband or wife. The tax on your jewels—the Brimmer Collection—will be enormous. You need a new spouse to leave your estate to.”

“I have decided to leave the jewels,” the lady answered, with a glance at June Flaghorn, “to my nephews and one niece. No further spouse.”

Grady’s face stayed blank, but he blanched. He despised June Flaghorn—more since her outburst when he declined to promote her to partner. She had none of the intellect that tax scholarship required; he only continued to employ her at all because this client was her aunt. What teatime advice had she fed the old lady now? He traced June’s stare straight to the client’s pearl choker and earrings. He would have to watch her—

“Well, if I must pay the tax,” Mrs. Brimmer said, hesitating, “isn’t there *some* other way to avoid the death tax?”

“It’s not a death tax, actually, it’s a *transfer* tax,” June snapped. She flicked her long hair, which Grady had already hinted did not belong at an esteemed Boston law firm.

He noted the act, but merely said, “What June says is correct. The estate tax is imposed on your *transfer* of property to others, in life or when you die. The Tax Code cannot tax you for owning jewelry; nor for dying. Only for giving your property away.”

“Well. Why don’t I just keep it?”

She said this with such sturdy logic Grady might have thought her a fool.

But it was genius. He sat astonished at his desk. He saw, as he had seen only eight or nine times in his career, the brilliant sim-

licity of a new loophole dawn. Why, she had no idea—why hadn't he thought of it before? It would be his decisive victory against the Tax Code, that battalion of rules that had succeeded for decades in counteracting his every move, like so many chesspieces across the board. This would be checkmate!

Or was it going too far? The concept of transfer was basic to the Tax Code. Instinct rose to stop him; he rotated the cufflink to and fro. But he leapt.

"Why, Mrs. Brimmer," he said, "if you're buried in your jewels, you won't have made a transfer."

June stared. Grady rued, to his feet, her presence.

"If there is no transfer, there will be no tax," he explained. "A transfer requires *someone to receive*, yet if, after you die, you keep the jewels, who can receive? Surely not the deceased *Body*—"

"The *Body*!" June snorted, wrinkling her nose.

"—Surely the *Body* cannot take ownership: what *is* death, if not the ceasing of dominion and control over property, as defined by the Tax Code? And surely the *Soul*—"

"No one believes in *Souls*," said June.

"You possess no spiritual faculties at all," snapped the aunt, straightening her back. "Go on, Mr. Grady, *I* do."

"The *Soul* cannot possess property of its own. The *Soul*, in Heaven, is free *precisely from* material concerns: no ownership there; no property even to control. And the *Soul* in Hell—a possibility I raise only to complete the theory, Mrs. Brimmer—precisely cannot shake off material affliction. No *control*. Heaven or Hell, no control: no ownership. By the Tax Code itself, *Body* and *Soul* can't own your jewels after death. You will make no transfer; you will pay no tax!"

It sank in; then June blurted: "Wouldn't you rather we got *some* of the jewels? Even if you did pay a tax?" She patted her ears, as if her aunt's pearls might someday come to rest there.

"Oh, no! Not after hearing these wonderful concepts. Mr. Grady, you're a genius. It's as if you've knocked down the whole dratted IRS, this Tax Code you refer to, in one fell swoop. Yes, I'd rather keep my jewels than pay the tax. Thank you."

She shook Grady's hand and went home. The next week she returned to execute her new will, in which June, under Grady's watchful supervision, recorded her instructions that the jewels be worn to the grave.

Grady's office phone soon buzzed; he addressed the Beacon Hill Club, the Senior Division of the Junior League, the DAR. The bar association tax chairman called.

"Grady, I hear you've done it, the most fantastic coup against the Tax Code ever achieved! You've beaten the brainy devil—when can you address our committee?"

Grady rubbed his cufflink and gave an excuse; he didn't want to broadcast the details now. It was him alone in this spiritual duel; he wanted no one else in. And new clients had begun to call. Mrs. Higginbottam, Mrs. Arden Eden, even Mrs. Oliver Browne. He found they would pay enormous sums for his advice.

"I'm so thankful," Mrs. Browne said, writing her check for eleven thousand in legal fees, "you've saved me ten *times* this in death tax."

"Yes," he said, deftly folding the check, though her savings weren't exactly the point. It was the shadow dance of power he'd been waging all these years, to box his rival in. He'd done it! He picked up his copy of the Tax Code, held it open before him, and laughed in its face.

In a matter of weeks Mrs. Brimmer died. Grady had his suspicions—a high salt dinner of country ham and corn chips at June's—but kept these thoughts to himself. The niece confirmed that the lady was buried in her jewels.

He filed the death tax return himself, his sense of victory swelling: he did not report the jewels as an asset to be taxed in the estate. It had begun. It worked! He would process more and more estates like this, his power would be ongoing, complete. He'd speak to the bar association after all—just enough to let word get around—he'd be the most sought-after tax lawyer in the city. Even if the IRS made an impassioned plea, invoking the Tax Code's purpose to raise revenue, it stood helpless to object. He had outfoxed the Code on its own terms.

But in a meeting with the Pitt family some weeks later, Grady paused in his review of the income payout from the Eliphalet Pitt III Trust and recoiled as from a road-squashed squirrel at the ornament on June Flaghorn's neck. Her fingers traced the glossy bumps of a lustrous pearl choker; pearls studded her ears. They were exactly like the ones Mrs. Brimmer had worn in his office months before.

"Where did you get those things?" he said, confronting June as soon as he could elbow the Pitts onto the elevator. She stared contemptuously at him.

"Tell me!"

His hands flew to the pearl earrings, to see if they were real; at that moment Grady's secretary, Miss Henniker, a woman of the most vaporous, flutter-prone condition, walked by—and though complaining of a stiff neck just that morning, craned to get a good look at them. She coughed pointedly.

"Where?" Grady whispered, as soon as she passed.

"Where do you think? At the grave," June said, almost spat.

Her manner alarmed him. His legs wobbled. Was this true? What would the bar members say? He pointed a trembling finger.

"You must put them back. Put them back or I'll prosecute."

"Prosecute!" June laughed. "You, whose tax advice to my aunt was illegal? If it's not a crime now, the IRS will surely make it one when they find out. I am certain a tax was due. She intended the jewels for me."

And as if to get his goat, she added:

"She looks well," and left.

She looks well! Grady stood nauseated. An associate of his firm, plundering a grave! His palms oozed sweat. It was as if someone—the force of law itself—was trying to get back at him. He wouldn't let it! It was just typical of the girl, her sarcasms since his refusal to promote her. She must have bought the pearls herself, and they were probably fake besides. He busied himself on other matters.

But a week later he chanced to walk past June's office. She was writing at her desk; around her neck gleamed a strand of sapphires: old, cut in the style his mother used to wear, of a distinctive beauty Grady had rarely seen. He barged in.

"June, where did you get that necklace?"

Was that black dirt, under her fingernails, staining her palms?

She looked up, the Tax Code poised in her hand, and said, "From her grave."

A joke, of course—Grady backed out of her office. It was explainable—the lady must have made a gift while alive. But such gifts should be reported to the IRS, June knew—it was becoming uncontrollable! Nonsense—he forced himself to work.

But on the six oh-nine train home Grady feverishly fought off distress. A new idea now, big and pushy, was sticking its way in. If June had taken the jewels, couldn't he? But that was ridiculous! Of course not. He wouldn't think the thought a single time more—

But alone in the living room that evening, while his wife Corrine arranged the coffee tray, the fact confronted him. He had created *property no one owned*, property *inviting possession*. He could snatch it from the Tax Code's jaw, without paying any price at all. He could almost feel the Code recoil at the thought. He rubbed the twisted gold of his cufflink, eyeing his wife's scoop neckline where her skin was unadorned.

"Rupus! Why are you staring at me like that?"

He reddened, and strained quickly to tame himself back to the precision and restraint of their living room. His books, classics, were lined up according to subject; his puzzle cubes were arranged by meticulous little rules; it was the same with his gun on the mantel. It stayed in the rose porcelain pot, awaiting, as the law required, the facts that would constitute self-defense. Impulse yielded to order, and he kissed his wife in relief.

But Miss Henniker's comment a few days later—that June had flown to Monaco for two weeks—weakened Grady's balance.

"Wherever did she get the money?" the secretary asked.

Grady was stunned. Could June have taken some jewels and sold them? He ought to call the police, but the police might drag in the IRS. Shaken, half-minded to go out to the grave himself, he called his neighbor and fellow commuter, Julian Strider, to arrange a drink before the evening train. Strider would shore him up.

"Did you see the ten billion dollar estate fraud in the *Wall Street Journal*?" Strider said over a gin. "Plain theft, that's what it was."

Grady was jolted: of course he could never rob a grave!

"Even more incredible," Strider said, "did you know the IRS can tax embezzlement income?"

"Oh, yes," said Grady, feeling himself return now to what was sensible and right. "The Tax Code's powers are amazing—you have to play by the rules alone. A lawyer's whole brilliance arises *within* the structure. . . . Look, I choose this spritzer: modest, yet a drink. My tie, gray and frayed, fitting for a tax scholar; yours, orange swirls, just what a stock analyst needs. Creativity, *within* order—"

But that was the problem. The jewels belonged to no order at all. They were in no man's land—

"They'll lock this poor slob up," Strider was saying. "What a shocker to the wife and four kids."

The spritzer spilled in Grady's hand. He could go to jail himself.

"You're right," he said. "A slob. Anyone who would do a thing like that—"

He grasped Strider's hand, shaking it warmly. What a friend, what a relief! They walked to the station, Strider, not noticing his friend's agitation, daring Grady to let him try out a new poker trick. Dimly Grady guessed the scheme was probably dishonest; he invited his neighbor to come over some evening anyway, thinking he'd catch Strider up. Suddenly Grady said, "Oh—Strider—just realized—left an income tax file at the office I ought to review to-night."

"Don't bother now," said Strider, his poker anecdote interrupted. "Leave it till morning."

"Well, maybe—yes, right. Home! Virtues of family and all that—"

But his wingtips had stopped on the sidewalk, and his hand extended to shake Strider's goodbye. He turned, walked quickly back to the office, and soon was taking the elevator up. He rifled through June's files.

Cemetery of Complete Delivery, Brookline Road . . .

He called Corrine, saying he had an emergency case that would take all night, and within two minutes had rented a car.

At ten o'clock Grady parked at the gate. Flicking on the flashlight he'd bought at a late-night drugstore—he'd bought a trowel, too, just in case—he made his way along the drive. The July night hung thick and warm; the smell of putrefying flowers soured his nostrils. A quarter hour passed before the beam picked out the grave. He drew close: had the earth been recently dug? He searched for evidence. But the site lay undisturbed.

Why, this is preposterous and unfitting, he told himself; some of my best clients are buried here. A tax lawyer in a graveyard! But he fell to his knees and shoveled. He dug quickly. Time passed, he barely knew: an hour, one and a half, more. The steel struck something hard. Have to, he told himself, confirm she hasn't removed a thing—

He exposed the coffin at last. He brushed off the dirt, struggling to open the lid, what a sickening task—

The withered face and body: framed with jewels. Why, they had packed in the whole collection, to the rim! Emeralds, rubies sparkled in the flashlight's glow. Aquamarines, lapis lazuli, fire opals lay on her chest; necklaces shone with cat's-eye, jasper. Grady reeled—take them—But wait! *A moan—*

He slammed the lid. It was only the wind. He shuddered, felt ill. *Run, fast—go, Grady, go! To the car—*

But his breath gave out. He slowed to a walk, breathing hard. He stopped.

No, Grady—but why not? After all, why not? It was only her face he'd feared—

Now he walked deliberately back. In a moment he was kneeling, raising the lid. He cast the light straight at her. How terrible—how could he? He, who had barely acted with his hands before; it was as if some other force propelled him—but what? He seized from her neck the biggest, a wide diamond collar, which curiously slid free as if not fastened at all; he stuffed it in his pocket. He refilled the hole carefully, and thoroughly tamped it down.

He fled to the gate, gulped the vinyl air of the rental car, and accelerated out the drive. It was unbelievable: Rupus Grady, driving out of a cemetery with a diamond necklace in his pocket! How had he gotten into this mess? It was all June Flaghorn, somehow she'd pushed him to it—he'd turn around, redeposit the thing. Yes! He saw a right turn ahead and braked.

But he couldn't—not now—his heart. Tomorrow. He drove straight down the highway to the city and dozed on his office couch. He'd go the next night, plot another excuse to Corrine—consider it done.

The next afternoon, closeted in an estate tax audit with IRS Agent Krumsky, Grady practically writhed. Peevishly he deferred to the Tax Code on all points.

"We're doing whatever the Code says," he argued. "My reputation depends on it."

"Yes," Krumsky said, watching him sideways. "I've heard of you."

It was only at the end of the day, as Agent Krumsky happened to take the same elevator down, that Grady realized how swiftly he'd wrapped the necklace in a handkerchief and placed it in his pocket. How had this happened? It was as if some deft power had manipulated him. He hadn't meant to go home at all, had meant to rent another car; Krumsky's insistence had confused him. He looked up: the agent was watching him. Krumsky met his eyes, nodding almost as if egging him on—could he *know*?

Grady sweated, hating the handkerchiefed stones. He'd go back and rebury them as soon as he abandoned the man at the street corner. But Krumsky, overruling Grady's goodbye, ended up walking halfway to the train station to discuss an upcoming seminar on Tax Lawyer Compliance and Ethics.

Grady was diverted, so that the necklace warmed in his pocket, melted so he forgot it, until the six oh-nine was barreling him home. Now what? Gems from a corpse in his own house; he shook his fingers in his pocket as if from opened jaws.

But the jewels were no one's—he'd done nothing wrong—and anyway he would put them back. He'd put them in the office vault tomorrow, where they'd stay until he drove with Miss Henniker to the cemetery. *An item of the decedent's, lately discovered . . .* He read the newspaper, completely calm.

But Corrine, putting on a record, asked what was wrong.

"Of course nothing's wrong."

What caused him to snap like that? But he'd make it up. He sat back, rested his head on the creweled chair, and listened to the Mozart piano sonata. The even order of the music, its sweet sensibility, the deference to feminine virtues that the era evoked, at once convinced him: he would give the diamond collar to his wife.

"Sweetheart; Corrine—"

From his jacket pocket he withdrew the diamond necklace. The tapered collar, buttoned with tiny pearls at the back, lay folded in his extended hand. With that one motion it was impossible for Grady to go back, to lay any claim at all to his previously ordered world. How could he—he was beaten—cornered! Yet as he sank, into a black void, he bent forward to receive, as he must, Corrine's thank-you kiss.

But the collar remained in his wife's hands; her cheeks red with pique. She held the object like something she didn't want to touch.

"Rupus, it's not in a box!"

A box!—what if she guessed! He should have bought some trinket with a wrapping—

Corrine jerked back a yard: "You didn't buy this for me!"

"Of course I bought it for you."

"It's been used!"

"Why, of course, it's an antique, a valuable estate piece—"

Estate piece!

He bent over the necklace, to hide his confusion. "Why, the sales-clerk didn't even polish it, here—"

"I've seen it on someone else!"

Someone else, he thought; impossible. When could Corrine have met Mrs. Brimmer? He'd find some way to explain it—

"Of all the low-down tricks, you've already given this to June Flaghorn, I've seen it on her!"

"June Flaghorn!"

Grady's mind spun. Had she been to the grave after all? Taken this out, put it back? He recalled how easily the collar had slipped off the neck. The woman—her temptations and flauntings—what had been behind it all? But it didn't matter. It was he who had acted now. He, not she!

"When could you possibly have seen June Flaghorn in this?" he whispered.

"When? I don't know when. Then you don't deny it! So that's what you were up to!"

"Up to what?"

"Her! You stayed out all night with her!"

He grasped to understand. "Corrine, don't say such things. People will talk—"

"They already talk! Your secretary saw you petting her ears!"

He'd never seen Corrine so irrational. He stepped close to calm her. But she raised a fireplace iron.

"Don't come near me, Rupus Grady! Get out of this house!"

"Have you lost your senses? This house is my property!"

"It won't be when I'm done. I'll take the house away, sue you for all the property you've ever had."

"Corrine, be calm, you're mistaken—"

Must he lose this? Love, his marriage, all he owned to the confusions of women, the legalities of the divorce court?

The doorbell rang; a crash resounded as Grady's wife, losing her balance, knocked over the rose porcelain pot on the fireplace mantel. Julian Strider, come to try out his new card trick, rushed in to see Corrine lunge at her husband with the fire poker.

"My God!"

Grady countered with the .22 pistol the toppled rose pot had provided him.

Interceding, Strider was caught between the two—

—As Corrine, dying suddenly from heart attack, said:

"Here—I hate them!"

And she thrust the jewels into Strider's hands.

Grady saw the transfer: stepped forward, frantic, to reverse it.

"Corrine," he cried, "the death tax! Don't give them to him—give them to me, your spouse, remember? The marital deduction—you'll create a tax, where there never would have been one at all! My darling, my wife!"

He wept as she gasped her last. The Tax Code had played its hand, caught up with the untaxed necklace here, tapped Corrine for the death it must attach to.

Oh fool, oh Grady!

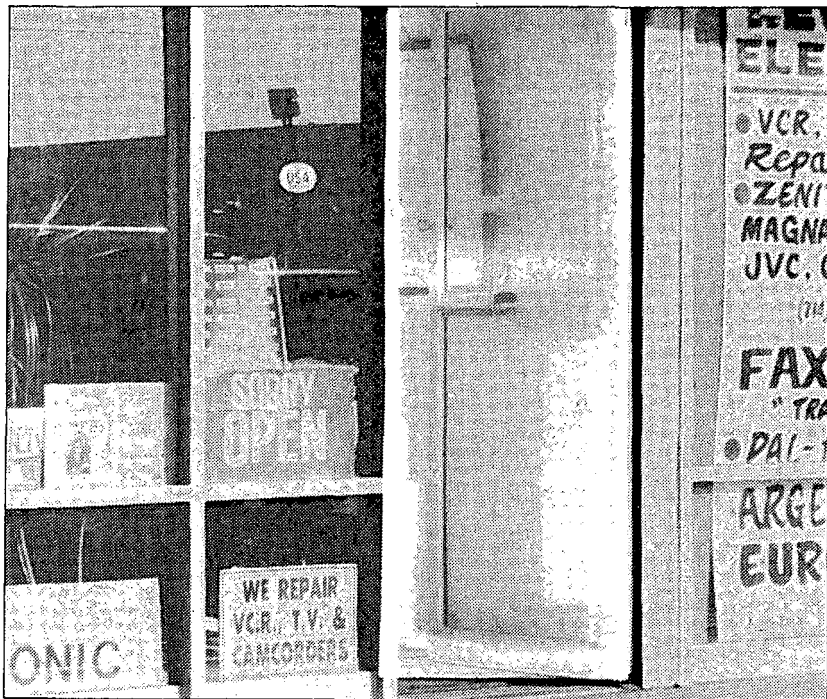
Strider, who had been grazed by the bullet as it barreled to miss Corrine, survived to testify that Grady shot only in self-defense. He gave the necklace to his wife—his very young, very beautiful wife, who was not likely to die for a long time.

The IRS, in assessing the tax due on Corrine Grady's estate, included the necklace as a gift made at death. Its value was several million dollars. The tax on that object alone exceeded a million, completely bankrupting her estate. To protect the family name Grady had to deplete his own holdings, pay an amount equal, in fact, to the several hundred thousands he had recently received in legal fees for his brilliant tax advice.

The young Mrs. Strider put the necklace in her sock drawer—where to her distress it soon was stolen, by unseen hands. They could only presume that it was swiftly redeposited on the market for fine jewels.

But later that year Agent Krumsky, at the IRS, examining a new death tax return that had just crossed his desk, winked to see that a very valuable old diamond necklace had been reported—generating another million in tax.

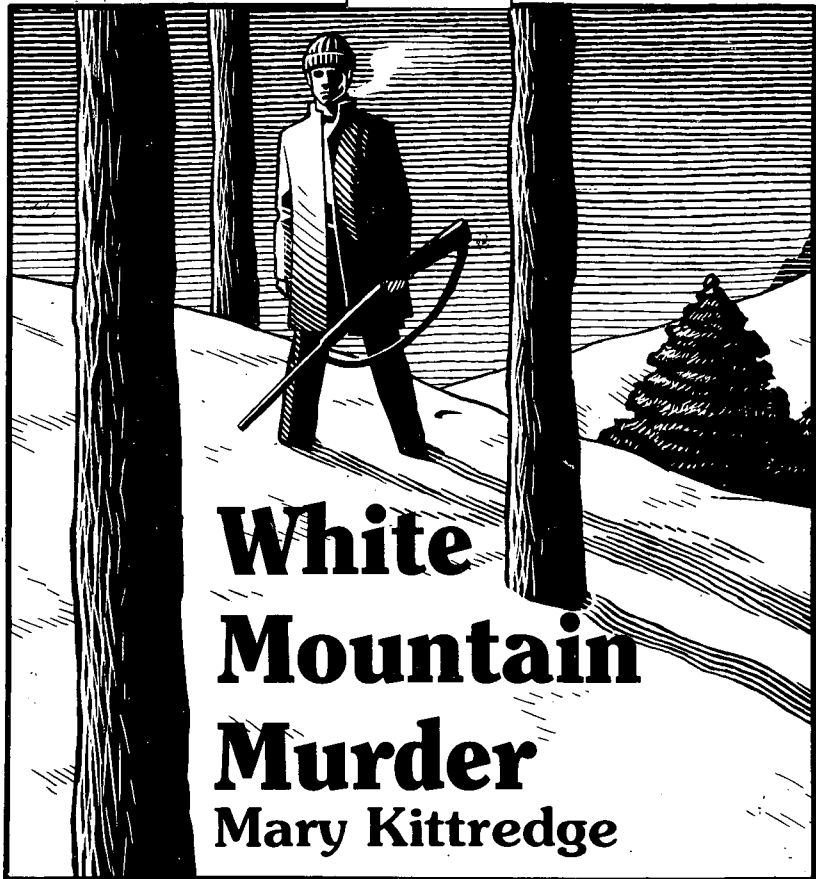
THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



William F. Smith, Garden Grove, Cal.

That's okay. Just don't let it happen again. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, 1540 Broadway, New York, New York 10036. Please label your entry "May Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit.

The winning entry for the Mid-December Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 157.



White Mountain Murder

Mary Kittredge

“**R**ewrite,” my agent Bernie Holloway said in the brisk, cheery tones he always uses when he has just finished promising something unaccomplishable to someone, and needs me to accomplish it immediately. The task this time was to turn a diet book, written

by a famous weight-loss doctor, into an item that did not irresistibly remind one of a monkey perched at a typewriter.

Bernie was phoning from his office in Manhattan, where steam heat, running water, and working electricity all were *de rigueur*. I was in a farmhouse in rural New Hampshire, where

an early snowstorm had knocked down all the power lines. As a result, we had no lights, no furnace, and no indoor plumbing, either, since our water came from a well by courtesy of an electric pump. The only thing even distantly related to *de rigueur*-ness about my present circumstances was incipient *rigor mortis*.

"Charlotte," Bernie coaxed, making me wish for the moment that the telephone lines had gone down, too. "They're offering a lot of money to get this book fixed, but if you don't want the job . . ."

Money. I sat up alertly. The radio said it could be a week before power was restored to outlying areas, and I figured this meant at least ten days for us, since if our farmhouse were any more outlying it would have to be on the moon.

"How much money, Bernie? And how much up front?"

Bernie named a figure that would keep my main squeeze Rob Solli and me in a comfortable motel in Nashua until our house became habitable again. It would also pay the handyman and housekeeper we were obliged to employ because if we hadn't hired them the owner of the house wouldn't have rented it to us and there was nothing else to rent around here but ski chalets with indoor gas grills,

jumbo hot tubs, and bedrooms all tarted up in red flocked wallpaper with king-sized water beds and mirrored ceilings, so ugly and depressing that not even many skiers would rent them, especially since the real ski areas were fifty miles away.

Minutes later Bernie and I agreed that I would rewrite a diet book called *Clean Your Plate*. The title seemed sure-fire—I didn't suppose we could possibly call it *Fat Chance*—as did the book's central thesis, which was that dieters could eat all they liked and still lose plenty of weight if only they chewed each and every mouthful a minimum of two hundred and fifty times.

Personally, I think the only thing worth chewing two hundred and fifty times is the caribou hide in which you intend to wrap your imminent firstborn, assuming you reside within the Arctic Circle and your name is not readily translatable from the Inuit. The book, however, only needed translating into English and out of the rah-rah self-help jargon in which it had been composed.

At least that was all Bernie said it needed. Humming, I got up from my desk; we had been here a week, and it was high time I settled into a routine. Solli was busy at the Mountain Medical Center, where after

tiring deeply of city hospitals he had signed up for a year of doing trauma surgery on people who had incurred their injuries while not actually in the midst of committing major felonies, and my adopted son Joey was in Boston on an outing for people who, like himself, moved about in wheelchairs; while he insisted on calling the excursions Trips for Crips, he seemed nevertheless to enjoy them immensely.

Out in the hallway, our housekeeper Mrs. Brandt was running her sweeper across the carpet; in the cellar, Mr. Brandt fed the woodstove yet another load of hardwood, large amounts of which the stove required in order to produce, I thought, rather small amounts of heat. The house's owner, whom we had never met, had departed for Florida two nights before we arrived and would not return until next summer, a plan that to me was looking more intelligent by the minute.

Still, I had work to do now, so I fetched some kindling and a couple of sticks of firewood and started the smaller stove with which my little office room was furnished, not telling Mr. Brandt I was doing it, since if I did he would insist on doing it for me, and not telling Mrs. Brandt about it, either, for she would think it was wasteful:

after all, it was nearly fifty degrees in here.

I was afraid of Mrs. Brandt, whose face was attractive when compared with, say, your standard woodsman's hatchet and whose manner was positively forbidding. She knew how to float an egg in a keg of brine, in order to create corned beef from flanks of venison. She comprehended to the instant how long a bottle of wine had to work before it became vinegar, and how many homegrown herbs to add to the bottle. In the attic big bunches of herbs hung drying and dahlia bulbs slumbered under layers of newspaper; had I tried this, the result would have been unfortunate, but under Mrs. Brandt's iron-willed influence no dahlia bulb ever rotted or shriveled, probably because it didn't dare to. Even her garden was recycled: at the far end of the attic over an unheated porch, seeds from her flowerbeds cured in the freezing temperatures Nature decreed for their proper future germination, from November to May.

In short, beside Mrs. Brandt I felt slatternly, as if I went around in a bathrobe with my hair in curlers and a cigarette dangling from my lips. Tiptoeing down the hall with the bag of ashes I had cleaned from the stove, I hoped not to be noticed

by her until I reached the metal ashcan outside the kitchen door.

As I dumped the bag, young Arthur Brandt seized the scoop from the hook mounted by the can and began shoveling ashes into a tin pail. "To put on that icy path by the barn," he explained. "I don't want Pa falling again. He could have hurt himself even worse than he did when he slipped last week."

He loped off, a rangy blond teenager in corduroys and a red lumber jacket. Devoted to his parents, Arthur spent nearly every waking moment outdoors, working around the property or away on hunting trips from which he returned with mallards, wild turkeys, and this past weekend with his first deer of the shooting season. These he hung, dressed, and butchered professionally; the freezer in the cellar was full of them, along with icicles he had stuffed among the wrapped packages until the power should go on again.

Musingly, I returned to my new office, which was no longer as cold as Arthur's meat locker thanks to the efficient little stove, and began transferring files from cardboard boxes into file cabinets. Tomorrow the manuscript of the diet book would arrive, and although I would probably have to rewrite

the thing while living in a motel, having a job at all made me want my office set up properly.

So it was not until nearly noon that I looked up, suddenly aware that the little stove was more efficient than I had counted on. Outside my window icicles had begun dripping, and in a woolen shirt I was damply overheated. Checking the thermometer I had hung from my new bookshelves, I found that the temperature in my small, closed room had risen to a tropical and nearly suffocating ninety degrees.

Also, something was cooking. Sniffing, I looked forward with anticipation to whatever Mrs. Brandt was fixing for lunch. But when I peered out, no cooking sounds emanated from the kitchen, nor was the hallway rich with the perfume of roasting meat. Puzzled, I turned back into the room.

And then I heard it: a quick hot sizzle from the top of the woodstove, as if a drop of fat had fallen upon it. Engrossed in my organizing chores, I had missed the sounds, but now each one seemed as loud as a rifle shot, especially when I looked up.

Across the ceiling spread a stain shaped like Africa, with droplets falling out of it onto the hot stove. And unless I was wrong, which I felt unhappily

sure I was not, those droplets were little drops of blood.

Henry Brandt's cheeks were as pink as winter apples, his hair as fine and pale as corn-silk, and his eyes as blue and clear as the sky on a bright, cold December morning. In one work-worn hand he clenched his pipe; the other hand clenched and unclenched itself on the oilcloth-covered kitchen table.

"We thought he left," Mr. Brandt said stubbornly. "How was we to know he got stuck up there somehow instead?"

"Henry," said the constable, whose name was Willard Brill, "he didn't just get stuck up there somehow. He got his head smashed in, and then somebody hauled him up there, to hide him."

"But who would do such a thing," Mrs. Brandt demanded, "and how would you know that's what happened, even if somebody did?"

"Well, Adelaide, I suppose I could be mistaken," Brill said. "But I've never seen the dead man yet who could wrap his own head up in a paper bag and stick his own body out of sight in a corner of the attic where it ought to have frozen. If this lady hadn't fired up the woodstove, heated up those floor

joists and so on, Eddie Carbo would have stayed solid as an ice cube till sometime around Easter."

Brill spoke calmly, but his voice had the authority that came from years of being first on the scene at every possible kind of lawbreaking, from rowdy teenagers to triple ax-murders. He had summoned the coroner and major-crimes investigators from the state police.

"Eddie Carbo," he repeated now, "owned this house, and he hired you and Adelaide to take care of it?"

"That was the agreement," Henry Brandt said. "We sold it to him, but we stayed on for our lifetimes. That way we had work, a home, and a bit to leave for Arthur when the time came."

Arthur, sitting there silently, shifted in his chair. Brill glanced at him but said nothing.

"Mr. Carbo was supposed to be in Florida," I put in. "He'd left two nights before we got here, or we thought he had."

Brill frowned. "How come his car's out in the barn, then? How'd he get to the airport?"

"Limousine," said Henry Brandt. "You know, there's a fellow in Little Corners now, drives folks over. New fellow, but they say he's all right. Mr.

Carbo didn't want to leave his car at the airfield. Got the fellow's number around here somewhere."

"Good. The state boys will want it, and they'll check with the airline, too, see what happened with the plane ticket."

"But if he was dead," Arthur objected, "he couldn't have gotten picked up by limousine, or taken a plane either, could he? So what's the point of asking anyone about that?"

Brill pursed his lips. "Maybe none. But I know the limousine, and Friday night I saw it out on Route 17, heading for the airport. Didn't see who was in it, though."

He looked pleasantly enough at Arthur as he said this, but Henry Brandt didn't like it one bit. "The boy was off hunting with some other young fellows," he said. "Got his deer."

"I see." Brill nodded judiciously. "And you, Henry? You off hunting, too? I ask because the word is, Carbo was getting ready to sell this place. House, land, everything. That's what people are saying."

Mrs. Brandt flushed. "Henry was laid up that night. He fell on that path by the barn, just the day before. Twisted his ankle, the doctor will tell you so. Besides, Mr. Carbo couldn't sell while we're alive. We had an agreement."

From her tone I got the impression there'd been some talk on this topic with Mr. Carbo, and that perhaps not all of it had been pleasant.

Brill shrugged. "Well, that's not what I heard. I heard Carbo had some developers up here: they found a way to get around that agreement of yours. I heard push had come to shove."

He got up and looked around the kitchen, which was spotless: linoleum gleaming, fixtures glimmering, clawfooted sink Ajaxed to snowy whiteness. "But if the boy was out hunting and Henry was laid up with a bad ankle, then I guess that leaves them both out of bashing Carbo's skull and hauling his body to the attic, now, doesn't it, Adelaide?"

Sudden silence filled the bright, chilly room as Mrs. Brandt got up, folded the dish-towel she had been smoothing in her lap, and laid it on the towel rack.

"That's right, Willard. It leaves them out." Untying her apron, she turned and inspected the kitchen as if she thought she might not see it again soon.

"I'll just fetch my coat and hat, then," she said.

"So much for a comfortable week in a motel," I grumbled. "We can't leave those two here

alone without her. They're like a couple of lost lambs."

Solli looked up from the big old four-poster bed where he had installed himself with books, snacks, a hot-water bottle, and a lamp that apparently burned whale oil to judge by its smell, which was twice as strong as the light it grudgingly emitted.

"We could take them with us," he suggested.

Solli is brilliant, good-natured, and gorgeous, but he does not have a grasp on the practicalities of life as it is lived by persons who do not spend eighteen hours a day in operating rooms.

"Fine," I told him. "You take them with you. They'd be about as comfortable doing surgery as they would be sitting in a motel room in Nashua."

"Hmm," said Solli. "I see your point. Where've they taken Mrs. Brandt anyway, and can't somebody bail her out?"

"To the town lockup, and not until tomorrow. There's got to be a hearing, and with the power out, everything's snarled up. Besides, the Brandts' money is in a trust for Arthur, Mrs. Brandt forbids anyone touching it, and without that they haven't got two pennies to rub together. And," I added, "neither have we."

Surgery on country folk is just as useful as on city people, only nowhere near as lucrative, especially in an area where, a couple of years earlier, a string of savings and loan failures had pretty much smashed the standard of living down to the subsistence level. What Solli was doing here was more like missionary work than medical entrepreneurship. Meanwhile, I had not sold many books lately. None, actually, was the exact recent tally.

"Bernie called," I said. "He offered me a rewrite job. And if we're not going to spend the money on a motel..."

Joey had returned and was in his room down the hall, playing what he fondly regarded as music at what he fondly regarded as a halfway decent volume. The big battery-run boom box shook the house a little bit, but not enough to go in and scold him about it, glad as I was to have him home safe again and especially since under the din I detected the rumble of another young male voice: Arthur was in there, talking with Joey.

"Charlotte," Solli said, "it's comfortable here in bed."

Whereupon, of course, I tested this assertion, finding it to be true in each and every respect, and the next afternoon we went down to the battered little town of Claremont, New

Hampshire, and bailed Adelaide Brandt out of jail.

We did not, however, clear her of a murder charge.

The number of people needed to keep an old house running smoothly during a power outage is always one more than the number of people in the house, unless one of them happens to be my son, Joey Rosen. We arrived home from the courthouse to find all the lamps trimmed and lit, a pot of chili simmering, and the parlor stove munching a meal of sticks. Cornbread was baking, a salad was marinating, and if there was anything wrong with the hot spiced wine that Joey had concocted, I missed it.

Mr. Brandt shook hands seriously with Joey, calling him a brave young fellow, and Mrs. Brandt tucked a red plaid blanket around his legs while I tried hard not to burst out laughing.

Joey addressed Mr. Brandt as "sir," graciously pronounced the blanket excellent, then spun his wheelchair in a perfect three-sixty, popped a wheelie, and zoomed off down the hall to Arthur's room where Arthur was showing him how to work a shotgun-shell reloading press and he was showing Arthur how to build a crystal radio, play a cutthroat game of

chess, and transform his biceps into a substance just slightly harder than zirconium by means of the weight bench they had spent most of the morning setting up in there.

"Oh," said Mrs. Brandt softly, watching him go, and I think it was at that moment that I began to like her.

"That boy needs a lap robe," Mr. Brandt agreed, "like a fly-fish needs water wings."

"He and Arthur certainly get along," I said, pouring a mug of hot spiced wine. "Maybe he can meet a few of Arthur's other friends, too, before he goes back to school next week."

Mrs. Brandt frowned. "I doubt that. I've told those boys' parents I don't want them coming around here any more. They drink beer, and Arthur doesn't need to be picking up their bad habits."

I looked at Mr. Brandt, who raised his newspaper, although there was hardly enough light to read by, and rattled it sharply. Mrs. Brandt fell silent and after a moment got up and went out to the kitchen. The lid of the chili pot clicked, the oven door banged, and the pantry door slammed as she went to get, I supposed, butter for the cornbread and milk for the boys to have at supper.

I sat quietly sipping my hot drink, thinking that a woman

facing a murder charge could be forgiven a little banging around the kitchen, hoping Joey's collection of heavy metal music tapes would not be counted as as bad an influence as beer (if the elder Brandts ever managed to decipher any of the lyrics, though, I had a feeling they would be), and wondering why, if Arthur was not allowed to hang around with his young friends, he had been on an overnight hunting trip with them last Friday night.

But I did not get a chance to pursue this question for a while, since first Solli came home and we had dinner, and after that of course we had to clean up; this, with no running water or working electricity, caused me to revise my opinion of paper plates, Styrofoam cups, and plastic cutlery, all of which I began planning to purchase in bulk at the next opportunity.

"I want you to know," Mrs. Brandt said quietly, folding her dishtowel and untying her apron when we had finished, "that Mr. Brandt and I appreciate your helping to get me home. We'll make sure you get your money back."

"I know you will," I said, feeling what the words must have cost her. To Mrs. Brandt, taking help from a stranger must

have been as shameful as being caught in the middle of the day with a sink full of dirty dishes.

"But," she added, "we don't want you meddling. You just go along and write your books, or whatever it is you do in that little room of yours, and stay out of matters that don't concern you."

And that was more than old fashioned pride, I thought; that was just plain weird. "I mean, it's not as if I'd gossip about her," I told Solli later. "I don't even have anything to gossip about. I don't know why she did it."

"Or," Solli pointed out, "if she did it."

He blew out the oil lamp. In the darkness, the old house made the faint poppings and creakings produced by old houses everywhere. But in my mind an idea had arrived, like a light bulb flashing on over the head of a cartoon character.

"I'll be darned," I said. "You're right." Almost at once I fell into a dreamless sleep from which I did not awaken until a telephone began ringing, far away.

But not far enough away to prevent me from learning, at two in the morning, that Arthur Brandt had been picked up outside a local roadhouse called the Lilac Club, for smashing car windows with a

barbell borrowed from Joey's body-building kit.

“Fellow decided not to press charges,” Willard Brill said the next morning. “Boy’s luckier than he knows, fancy car like that. And the fellow’s name’s not a matter of public record.” He frowned heavily at me from behind his desk, in the hole-in-the-wall constable’s office on Main Street.

“Oh, but the Brandts want to thank the man,” I lied fluently, “for being so understanding about the whole thing. You know how proud they are. And they want Arthur to apologize.”

Prying at a teenaged boy’s secrets is about as useful as trying to open a rosebud with a crowbar. But I didn’t have time to gain Arthur’s trust gradually, to get him to tell me what had really happened. Bernie’s diet book sat on my desk, awaiting the slash-and-burn treatment it so urgently required; meanwhile the county clerk of courts sat at his desk, counting the bail money I had rashly handed over to him. If I did not replenish our bank account with the money Bernie would wire me after I expressed him three completed chapters of the diet book, checks I had already written

would soon be bouncing higher than the daredevil ski trails of the White Mountains.

Still, I thought Solli was right: Mrs. Brandt could well be innocent. For one thing, if she’d wanted to kill Eddie Carbo, she wouldn’t have bothered with anything so inelegant as bashing his head in; she’d simply have fed him some of the venison stew I’d seen her putting together in the kitchen as I was leaving for Brill’s office. To judge by the amount of garlic and spices in that stew, one dose of it would kill and embalm a person.

More to the point, if she’d wanted him hidden, she wouldn’t have stuck him up where somebody had stuck him. She’d have put him with the garden seeds over the unheated porch, where no one trespassed and everything stayed frozen no matter what stove got fired up, and in spring she’d have planted him in a flowerbed.

“Well,” Willard Brill said, looking unfooled, which was when I began seriously to respect him as an officer of the law, “I guess it wouldn’t do any harm to tell you who the fellow is. Boy ought to face up to what he’s done. I don’t know what got into him, a thing like that. Other youngsters around town maybe, but not Arthur.”

I agreed. Arthur was under ordinary circumstances about as likely to go out smashing car windows as I was to attempt one of those ski trails. Furthermore, he hadn't smashed at random; only one car at the Lilac Club had been on the receiving end of his fury. And that car, as it turned out, had candy-apple red paint, antelope-leather bucket seats, a sound system with Bose 400-watt quadraphonic speakers, and Nevada plates.

Which meant that either Arthur had gone out and trashed the most expensive car he could find, just for the sheer orneriness of it, or he had gone looking for that car, located it without much difficulty—it being, around here, about as inconspicuous as a giraffe—and beaten the hell out of it on purpose.

Willard Brill passed a piece of paper across his desk.

"Randall White," I read aloud. The name rang a bell. "Isn't that the guy who was developing those vacation condos up in the northern part of the state? Only his company went under, took all those savings and loans with it, lot of local people lost a lot of money?"

Wasn't White, I meant, the man who'd killed Claremont, New Hampshire? A lot of the cash from his company had

never been accounted for, and now there was more plywood than glass in the windows of what had once been the business district of Claremont, and the townspeople's faces were as hard and grim as New England granite.

"Ay-up." Willard's look showed what he thought of condos in general and Randall White in particular. "Fact is, I happened to let Mr. White know that if folks around here got wind of who he was he might get more'n his windshield smashed. Quite a few got hurt bad after that last little adventure of his whereabouts."

Including Brill himself, his expression said, but only for an instant. He wasn't the type to dwell on his own troubles, or to increase the troubles of others any more than he had to; either; taking Mrs. Brandt to the lockup, he'd been efficient and matter-of-fact. She could not have borne being patronized.

"And now," I said, "here White is in the town where Eddie Carbo was getting ready to unload four hundred acres, only Carbo can't sell them now because Carbo is dead."

"Ay-up," Brill said again. "I asked White about that, too. 'Course, he wasn't buying the land himself."

Out in the street, rusty pickup trucks loaded with

firewood rolled by, and Jeeps brandished scarred yellow plow blades, their tire chains jingling, in preparation for the blizzard the weatherman said we were about to have. "He wasn't? And why 'of course'?"

"Not allowed to," Willard said. "Part of the deal White made to get out of prison time. They couldn't prove he knew where the money went, but at least he can't do any more of what he calls land developing in the state of New Hampshire."

"I see." Curiouser and curiouser; I wondered whom I could find to fill me in. "Well, thanks. Arthur will be coming into town later, to see if he can find Mr. White and tell him he's sorry."

"'Course," Willard added thoughtfully, "no law says White can't advise other people about land deals, long as no money of his own goes in the situation. Long as he's not the one making any profit."

I turned from the door, partly in surprise at Brill's talkativeness and partly because the air outside was so cold one breath of it froze my nose hairs solid. Willard was watching me, a look of quiet Yankee shrewdness on his face.

"Nice family, the Brandts," he went on. "Not like some of

'em who let their boys run wild, get up to who knows what all."

"Right," I said, and then I guessed hard. "Listen, you wouldn't happen to know where Arthur could find Mr. White? Just to save his hunting for him in this cold weather."

"Ay-up," he pronounced yet again, and the ghost of a smile on his lips told me I'd guessed right. "Randall White's over to the diner, waiting for his rental car. Sitting in there with a nephew of his, last time I looked."

"Fine," I said. "I'll tell Arthur." And then I hotfooted it over to the diner myself, just as Willard Brill meant me to.

The diner was in an old railroad car that used to carry rich summer people and their servants up to the big resort hotels in Bretton Woods at the foot of Mount Washington. Now it hunkered beside a one-pump gas station, a tiny grocery, and a liquor store. Since the bank failures, these along with the Lilac Club were all the surviving enterprises of the little town.

Inside the diner were fellows in buffalo-checked jackets, wearing work boots that looked as if they ought to be shuffling in line in front of a soup kitchen, and then there were the Whites in cashmere topcoats, with black doeskin driv-

ing gloves on the counter beside their plates. They wore identical pairs of polished black wing-tips, which in this weather were about as practical as an extra coat of toenail polish, and they were arguing hotly about something while trying to look as if they were not.

I slid onto a stool beside them and studied the chalkboard menu. The special for today was red flannel hash, which always tastes to me just like its namesake, so I ordered eggs, sausage, home fries, and coffee. This I thought would keep me busy enough so I wouldn't seem to be eavesdropping, which of course I proceeded to do with a vengeance.

"Look," the elder White said grimly, "it's just bad luck. The guy's housekeeper bonks him, the land's gonna be tied up in probate. You wanna do a deal now, find another property. It's that simple."

"But, Uncle Randy," the young White whined in reply while attempting to look strong, brave, friendly, cheerful, obedient, reverent, and even halfway intelligent, and failing miserably at all of these, "I wanted *that* land. We had it all worked out, and I was gonna put some real nice houses on it, a hotel, all kinds of neat improvements. It was gonna be like the olden days when rich

people came to the resorts, only it was gonna be *my* resort."

I ate some sausage, glancing in the mirror across from the counter and thinking that if the younger White ever wanted to fit in well enough to run a successful business around here, the first thing he'd better do was shave that mustache; it looked as if a little brown worm were trying to wiggle across his lip.

Also I thought anyone who planned a big resort in this area might as well go over to Little Corners, to the gun shop there, and buy a gun and shoot himself in the foot with it. Doing so would be faster, cheaper, and lots less painful than running a resort in a place where you couldn't keep the power on or the water running or the central heat operating for big chunks of the winter, and where in the summer there swarmed mosquitoes so big that, as Mr. Brandt said, they could stand flat-footed and look right over the barn at you.

And the elder White knew it. He was pleased that his nephew hadn't been able to complete a deal with Eddie Carbo; I could tell by the satisfied way he dabbed his lips with a paper napkin, then glanced at his watch before smiling at his younger relative. He was as

happy as a clam, and as cold and fishy, too.

"We'll find you another piece of land," he said evenly. "And next time, I'll look at it *before* I bankroll you, so no one will be tempted to take advantage of your inexperience. Is that completely understood?"

And wasn't that interesting: Randall White was behind the attempted purchase of the Brandts' farm, behind it in a way that the courts had expressly forbidden.

The younger man's lip thrust out sulkily. "But I *wanted*," he began again. Then he looked at his uncle, in the full glare of whose professional regard he apparently remembered a number of things that had previously escaped him.

"Understood," he whispered. "I'm sorry, Uncle Randall. Let's go see if the car is here, okay?"

The two men left the diner, leaving me to finish my coffee and to think about Randall White, who'd had a motive for wanting Eddie Carbo dead, whose own nephew was clearly terrified of him, and who was now so anxious to get out of town quietly that he was letting Arthur Brandt escape punishment after Arthur had smashed all the tinted glass out of White's expensive automobile.

To me, it added up to Randall White killing Eddie Carbo for trying to take advantage of White's nephew, and to stop the land deal. Arthur's going after White's car made me think so even more; after all, it was Arthur's mother getting charged with Carbo's murder in place of White himself.

But in that case, why weren't the Brandts saying anything about White's being at the house that night? And if Arthur had been hunting with his friends, how had he known to target White's car? And if he *did* know, why target it? Some broken glass might make Arthur feel better; still, it wasn't going to do his mother any good.

There was another possibility, though, one I didn't like thinking about. In fact it all nearly made me wish I were back in my office working on the dratted diet book. Instead it looked as if I would have to find Arthur's friends and have a talk with them, a process I expected to be about as easy as pulling my own teeth out with a pair of pliers.

And then, of course, I would have to talk with Arthur.

The hunting shack was a grey, weathered structure, tightly built of scrap lumber and

tarpaper and equipped with a remarkably fine stone chimney.

"Who's the stonemason?" I asked. The biggest boy, whose name was Tom Bonnet, dug at the frozen earth with the steel-tipped toe of his old leather boot.

"My pa showed me," he mumbled. One of the others, a skinny, carrot-topped youth with light eyes and skin as pale as a pan of milk, nudged him and muttered something slyly.

Tom jabbed the boy with his wool-jacketed elbow. "Shut up, Pocket. You too, Chester," he added to the other youth, a plump boy with black brush-cut hair and a soft pouting mouth.

The two fell back a little, bumping and shoving each other in nervous horseplay. "How'd you get here?" Tom demanded. "You walk? Deer season, you coulda got shot."

I shrugged. The air on the mountainside was cold but still, and sunshine the color of champagne slanted obliquely through the bare branches of the ash trees. A hawk sailed lazily in a blue sky broken only by a puff of smoke from the coal-fired locomotive of the cog railway, on the far side of Mount Washington.

"Mr. Brandt said you were hunters, not just kids with guns," I told Tom. "I'm wearing

orange and I don't have any antlers, so I figured probably you wouldn't shoot me."

Tom glared at the other two, who thought my comment about not having any antlers was absolutely hilarious. "Shut up, you guys," he repeated, and they did, for the time being.

"Anyway," I took a deep breath and plunged in; a teenage boy can smell whatever pitch you've got coming from a mile away anyway, so you might as well just lay it out for him, "Arthur's in big trouble."

"Dumb cluck," Tom commented. "Hey, everybody knew that car belonged to that White guy. He got what was comin' to him. But bustin' windows, Art oughtta leave that stuff to us. He ain't any good at it." The other two nodded their agreement, the plump black-haired boy trying to look tough and the redhead managing it effortlessly.

"Right," I said. "But that's not the trouble I mean."

Three pairs of eyes narrowed; three mouths set skeptically. The hawk fell into a steep dive that ended in a small creature's death shriek. A breeze sprang up, stirring the dry leaves and smelling of snow that would be falling tomorrow night.

I walked around the shack while I told the boys the story:

about finding the body and Mrs. Brandt's being blamed, about Carbo's selling the house and land out from under the Brandts, and about what might happen next.

"So," I finished, "I need to know if he was here. Because if he was, then what I'm thinking couldn't have happened. If he wasn't, I need to know it now so I can try to help him."

Maybe Arthur's window-smashing stunt hadn't had anything to do with his mother's arrest at all. Maybe it was Arthur who had made sure Eddie Carbo couldn't sell the farm out from under the Brandt family, and afterwards had gone out to punish the other party to the deal—the most visible, accessible symbol of that other party being Randall White's fancy car.

"'Course Art was here," the black-haired boy said stoutly. "He got his deer, didn't he? How's he gonna do that otherwise?"

"That's true, I suppose. But what about you three? Did you get your deer, too? Did you go out with him Saturday morning? Or were you all too hung over from the beers you were drinking up here Friday night?"

They looked startled. "Arthur doesn't drink beer," I went

on, "so I suppose he got up early and went out without you."

"Hey," the redheaded boy demanded, his girlish chin lifting belligerently, "what're you tryin' to get us into? We don't have no beer up here, do we, guys?"

He looked to the others to support him in a statement that was ridiculous on the face of it; behind the shack rose a small mountain of beer cans, and they all had seen me noticing them.

"Tom," I appealed to the leader of this bunch, "I'm not here to nag you about a couple of brews. Was Art here with you Friday night or not? Did he really get that deer on Saturday morning?"

The boy gazed at me. "You got here what, Sunday?" he asked. I said we had, knowing he'd figured out a way to put one over on me, or thought so. "Deer was hangin' then?" he asked mildly.

Yes, I told him, remembering very well. The carcass hung two days, gutted and minus its head, from a hook Mr. Brandt had suspended from an eyebolt installed in a beam projecting from the rear of the garage, a location that had proved unfortunately all too visible from my place at the breakfast table.

"Deer hung Sunday and Monday?" Tom queried, feeling

himself on firmer ground now that he'd steered us to a topic in which he had some expertise. "Then Art had to of shot it Saturday. It was warmer last week, they wouldn't of hung it longer'n two days. So he had to of shot it Saturday."

The other boys just stood there, admiring the resourceful way he had dealt with me. I admired it, too; he was pretty good for a seventeen-year-old.

"So what you're *not* telling me," I said in the voice that I have developed specifically for use on teenage boys, "is that you guys all came up here, Arthur to hunt and the other three of you to party. You got drunk and passed out around nine, it gets dark pretty early now, and none of you knows another thing about anything until the next morning, when Arthur came back dragging a dead deer."

I looked at them. "Is that about the size of it, or should I send Willard Brill up to measure the beer can pile?"

"Ma's gonna kill me," the black-haired boy blubbered, and even the pale-eyed, red-headed character looked worried.

"Cripes, Tom," he said, "Brill's bad news."

Tom kept smiling, which in the end was why I went on liking him: any teenage boy can

lie to you, but not many can take defeat so gracefully.

From the bottom of the ravine came the cracking of a couple of rifle shots, concussive smacks that made the plump boy flinch nervously, even from a couple of miles off. He glanced around to see if anyone had noticed, and I pretended I hadn't, but it made me realize what I'd been missing.

"What's Arthur shoot?" I asked Tom. "Thirty-ought six?"

"Deer, yeah. Twelve-gauge for birds and little stuff. He likes bowhunting, but his old man doesn't let him go. Christ, they treat Art like a marble statue, 'fraid he might get broken."

He kicked at a frozen clod of earth, possibly wishing he received a bit more of the marble statue treatment, himself. His clothes were clumsily mended hand-me-downs from his father or from Salvation Army boxes. I had a sudden unwanted picture of the boy grimly teaching himself the intricacies of the darning needle. At my look of inquiry, he explained.

"Bowhunting, you gotta drop that sucker first shot. Ain't like with a rifle, see, force of the impact kinda helps knock him down. You gotta nail something vital, bowhunting, or you'll be trackin' a wounded buck, damned animal bleedin' an'

sufferin' out there, you feeling like a jerk about it."

"I see," I said. "So Mr. Brandt thinks a rifle is the only way to go, for deer?"

Tom shook his head. "For Art he does, but not for himself. Hell, my old man said when Henry Brandt was younger, he was the best goddamned bowhunter in the state of New Hampshire."

He stopped, suddenly aware of how much he had been talking, and to whom. The other boys were looking at him oddly, as if he had been carrying on a conversation with a rock or a tree stump.

"Is there stonework enough for you and your dad to make any kind of decent living around here?" I asked him as I headed out.

But he just shrugged, returning to the far side of the chasm that normally divides teenage boys from adult women, however well-meaning those women may wish to be.

"Oh, To-om," the redhead fluted in mocking falsetto as I turned; cackles of laughter and the sounds of a scuffle followed.

I left them to it. The path was steep, bordered by juniper, pin oak, and a few white pines. As I descended, I thought about the clothes Joey no longer wore, now that he had abandoned heavy lifting in favor of a low-

weight, high-repetition routine; this provided, he said, better strength with less bulk. It also made available a wardrobe of shirts and sweaters too large for Joey but just about right for Tom Bonnet. I would have to ask Mrs. Brandt the best way to get them to him, without embarrassing him.

Contrary to my earlier belief, however, I would not have to ask Arthur much of anything. Without intending to, the boys on the mountain had answered almost all my questions. I was pretty sure I knew now what had happened to Eddie Carbo, and why no one was saying anything about Randall White's being at the house the night Carbo died. I even knew where to look for the single object that, if I found it, would confirm my theory.

If it still existed, it was in one of two places: at the bottom of the ashcan, or on that icy path down by the barn.

Sifting wood ashes through a colander doesn't sound so bad until you get right down to doing it. Breathing through my nose produced a fit of sneezing, and opening my mouth was utterly out of the question, a situation Solli would likely have appreciated had he been there to enjoy the

unusual resulting silence. I had sifted an entire can of ashes and come up with two melted nails, a lump of copper that had been a penny, and a chunk of charcoal that had slipped through the woodstove grate.

It was two in the afternoon, and Henry Brandt was in the cellar, working by the light of an oil lamp to repair a gasoline engine he meant to rig up to an old electrical generator. Solli was at the hospital; Joey was doing, it looked like, about a million pushups; and Mrs. Brandt was in her bedroom lying down, which as an indicator of her mood was more ominous than anything I could think of.

Only Arthur Brandt was nowhere to be found; I hoped he was not off breaking any more windows anywhere, but his absence was convenient. I dumped the ashes back into the can, then realized that I ought to have replaced the can on the porch first, since an ashcan full of ashes is lots heavier than an empty one.

Grumbling, I bent my knees and straightened my back in the way Solli has taught me will prevent my spending a lot of money on corrective spinal surgery someday, wrapped my arms around the can, and hoisted, irritably and uselessly, which was when Arthur came

around the side of the house and stopped.

He didn't say anything, just looked at the ashcan and at me, then took the can and lifted it up where it belonged. Turning, he gazed out over the yard where a few remaining ice patches glistened in the winter sunshine.

Beyond the yard's split-rail fence was a pasture where the Brandts kept a few goats that Arthur fed and watered every day. On the hillside spread the flower and vegetable patches he dug in spring, weeded in summer, and mulched every autumn with barrowful after barrowful of compost, since, as he'd told Joey, his mother and father both were getting a bit past the heavy work.

And then there was the woodpile, neatly squared. Arthur had put it there; now he stood staring at it on a cold afternoon in December, with bluish shadows lengthening and a tang of woodsmoke in the air, remembering, I supposed, the chainsaw roaring, his sweat mingled with the musk oil he used to keep the black flies off as with every pickup load he built that woodpile higher, until at last he felt safe against another winter.

"Ma was forty-five when she had me," he said after a while, "and Pa was fifty. They can't

handle this place without me, not any more."

It was a statement of fact, like Tom Bonnet learning to mend hand-me-down clothes, or the storm taking down the power lines. It happened, and you dealt with it.

"You've done a fine job," I said. "And I think you'll be able to go on doing it, unless you decide to go off to school. I know your folks would want that for you."

He laughed bitterly. "Yeah. Prison school. I just never counted on a guy like Eddie Carbo. And I sure never thought I'd kill the guy, just by shoving him." He spread his hands, gazing at them in pained wonderment. "All I did was shove him once."

"You smashed the car windows hoping you'd be caught, didn't you?"

"Yeah. Once Ma went to jail, I wanted to do something bad to Mr. White. But mainly I wanted to be caught for something, I guess. Like, if I couldn't get punished for one thing, I needed to get punished for something else. Nuts, huh?"

"I don't think so," I said, imagining what the idea of killing a man would do to the conscience of a kid like this. "Anyway, let's go down to the barn. Now that you know what

I'm looking for, you might as well help me find it."

There was a moment when I saw him thinking he might run, but then Joey opened the back door and called to us. "Hey, you guys, you going steady or what? Come on, Brandt, I'll teach you how to beat me with only a castle and two pawns."

"Okay," Arthur called back, "in a minute. I gotta help your ma with something first."

He turned to me. "I know where it is. I've been staring at it every day. I'll get it."

He loped off down the path, returning with what I had been sure must be here somewhere: a lump of metal, all that remained of a steel hunting arrow tip after the arrow was burnt up in a woodstove.

"Pa thought the safe thing would be to burn the arrow, then toss the tip out. Put it in plain sight so nobody'll find it, he said. Only I guess Pa was wrong. Maybe his mind's getting past it, too."

I saw this new idea begin worrying him. "No," I told him firmly, "your father was correct. Now, I have just one question to ask you: what did you do when you saw Eddie Carbo was dead?"

Arthur's face closed. *Grown-up*, it said, and it might just as

well have been saying *hostile, unpredictable space alien*.

And then something happened. I have no sure idea what it was: maybe all those years of his parents playing straight with him, telling him the truth and making him work and showing him in every way that there exists a straight-line relationship between cause and effect, and that the nature of one dictates the nature of the other.

Or maybe it was just built into him. "I wrapped his head so it wouldn't make a mess and hauled him to the attic," he said. "It was hard, trying to do it so my folks wouldn't hear, and I didn't get away with that, 'cause Pa did hear me but he didn't let on; not then, anyway. I closed Carbo's bedroom window—that was where we'd been arguing, in his bedroom—and looked around to see that I hadn't missed anything."

"Window?" Now, that was interesting. "Why would he have a window open? Wasn't it cold that night?"

Art shrugged. "I don't know why. He just did. After that I washed the glasses, 'cause he'd have washed them if he'd still been alive. He was picky about things like that, and I wanted it to seem like he was still alive because I was . . . scared. Scared because I'd killed him,

and if I went to jail, I didn't know what would happen to Ma and Pa."

And they hadn't known what might happen to him, which was why they had covered for him; first Henry Brandt, when he heard Art hauling the body up to the attic, and then Adelaide, keeping her mouth shut on principle. She hadn't known until she got back from jail what her husband and son had done, and even then she hadn't known all of it because they didn't.

Meanwhile, I didn't care if Eddie Carbo was in the habit of boiling his glassware in battery acid. Art's fear was beside the point, too, now, although it hadn't been that night. It was what had made him so thorough.

"I put on Carbo's coat and hat," Art said, "in case Ma or Pa saw somebody going out. Carbo'd sent his luggage ahead. And the limousine guy isn't from here, he didn't know the difference. He thought he was driving Carbo."

"Never mind all that," I said. "How many glasses? I mean, how many did you wash?"

"Three," Art said, although he looked puzzled; he was such a forthright kid. "Two that were already there, and one from when I brought him a glass of water after I'd knocked

him down. Only when I came back with the water for him, I saw that he was . . .”

He stopped, seeing the look on my face.

Three glasses. Bingo.

You can say what you want about eating Bambi: that venison stew turned out to be delicious. Even Joey, who at the time refused to consume anything that possessed a nervous system—until I pointed out to him that at least with a vertebrate you could be fairly sure when it was dead, by contrast with, say, your standard crustacean or root vegetable—asked for seconds.

“So how’d you figure out about the arrow?” Joey asked me as we were clearing the table. The others had gotten up, Mr. Brandt and Arthur to tinker a little more with that generator, Solli to work on an article about closing large surgical incisions, which he finds almost as interesting as opening them, and Mrs. Brandt to sit quietly in the parlor, knitting by lamplight.

“Well,” I said, “the boys told me things, to try to convince me that Arthur shot that deer. But they didn’t say they’d heard it, even when a couple of rifle shots went off across the ravine. It should have reminded

them to say it, you see, to bolster their story.”

Joey spun his wheelchair, plucked a stack of plates one-handed from the dining table with the skill of a prestidigitator, and spun back again, depositing them on the counter by the sink.

“Art told me he’d heard his dad and Mr. Carbo arguing about selling the land to White’s nephew, before Art headed out that afternoon,” Joey said. “He didn’t say he’d come back here later, though, to try convincing Mr. Carbo himself.” Joey glanced sideways a little anxiously at me as he confided this.

“I know,” I said, plunging my rubber-gloved hands into the dishwater Mr. Brandt had heated on the woodstove; puffs of steam rose from it, smelling of soapsuds. “But even if he had told you that part, I don’t expect you to betray your friends’ secrets to me. Not unless they’re in bad trouble or about to be.”

He nodded. “And if that ever happened, I would, Charlotte, honest. It’s weird, but you don’t ask me very many questions, and somehow that makes me feel like telling you the answers.”

He placed a heap of silverware on the counter, and of course I did not wrap my arms

around him and kiss him, which suddenly was what I felt like doing.

"So," he frowned, "when Art came back later that night, Mr. White was here, but he didn't want anybody to know he was 'cause people would know he was behind the deal, so when he heard Art come in, he ducked into Carbo's closet? And then Art and Carbo argued and Art shoved him, is that it?"

I attacked the stew pot with a nylon net scrubber. "It is. White must have hidden his car; anyway, Art didn't know White was here. And when Mr. Carbo fell, he hit his head on the side of the little stove in his room and was lying there, stunned. So Art, kind soul that he is, ran to get him a glass of water. But when he came back, Mr. Carbo was dead."

Joey nodded comprehendingly. "Mr. White came out when Art left and bashed Carbo with a stove poker and scrambled out the window. I just bet White meant to kill Carbo all along, don't you? Because White knew the land deal wouldn't work out; he knew Carbo was basically trying to swindle White's nephew. And a guy like White, he wouldn't go for that at all."

I smiled at Joey, pleased at his ability to come up with a verb like "swindle." The poker

from the stove in Carbo's room had turned up, too, in the bushes outside Carbo's window, and there were some marvelously bloody fingerprints on it: enough, Willard Brill agreed, to get the Brandts off the hook and someone else—probably Randall White—onto it.

"But Arthur thought *he'd* done it," I said. "He got rid of Carbo's ticket by giving it to a kid who was waiting stand-by at the airport to get on Carbo's flight. Then he hitchhiked back."

"Wow," said Joey, looking more impressed than I liked, since if there is one thing I do not want him doing even more than all the many other things I do not want him doing, it's hitchhiking.

"That's right," said Mr. Brandt from the doorway. "That just about covers it."

I poured him a cup of coffee, and he sat down at the kitchen table. "Except for your part," I said. "After Arthur left, you went to the attic and saw Carbo's body. Then you limped up the mountain on your bad ankle to get Art a deer, so he'd have an alibi if he needed one; that's how you knew the other boys were drinking beer. But you didn't take a rifle. You took your bow."

Brandt sipped his coffee. "It was right around dawn, and I was pretty near the hunting shack. If the boys had heard the shot, they might have come out. Better to be quiet about it. Got back here and sent Art up, told him where the animal was, and that what had happened was to be our secret."

I was about to tell him that he ought to have confided in Adelaide sooner, since if she had hidden the body no one would ever have found it. But I didn't get the chance to because first Arthur appeared in the doorway and then all the lights went on, the sudden glare dazzling us and the hum of the refrigerator as loud as the cog-rail locomotive up Mount Washington.

"Henry, your generator works," I said. "That's wonderful!"

He got up. "Damndest generator I ever seen, then, givin' power when I ain't even got it started. Come on, boy, let's get the water heater cranking. Utility fellows got the lines up, we better take advantage before the snowstorm hits and they decide to go down again."

Which is how we all got hot baths and clean clothes and washed the woodsmoke from our hair, so the next morning the only thing that still stank in that house was the diet book.

*

"Bernie," I said into the telephone, "do you know what this weight-loss guy recommends a person should actually *eat*?"

Chewing lettuce leaves two hundred and fifty times was more slenderizing, as it turned out, than using the same technique on mashed potatoes and gravy, and carrots would slim you down faster than a dry martini, which was what that book made me want.

Just then Mrs. Brandt came in with her carpet sweeper. She glanced down at the manuscript, at the telephone, and at my face. Swiftly she went out again.

"Charlotte," said Bernie as Mrs. Brandt returned and set a box on my desk. The box was full of yellowing old three-by-five cards; the label on it read "Secret Recipes—Slimming Foods."

"I've always wanted to use these," she said. "They're good, and my aunt lost seventy pounds with them. They were supposed to stay in the family forever, but somehow I don't feel like having secrets any more. So maybe you'd like to do something with them, dear," she finished, smiling gently at me as she departed.

"Charlotte," Bernie said, "are you there?"

"Yes, Bernie," I replied as visions of low-cal sugarplums began dancing in my head; this stuff looked *delicious*.

"Call the diet book people," I told him, "promise them three chapters by the end of the week. Only, Bernie, it's not a flat fee any more. It's a sixty-forty split, and we're the sixty."

To calm him, I read him a recipe for a dozen carrot muffins at forty calories apiece. They tasted, the card said, just like double-chocolate cake, and after what Mrs. Brandt had managed to do with that venison stew, I believed it.

"Are they all like that?" Bernie whispered.

"All of them," I said. "This book will make us rich."

It did, too: it put Arthur Brandt through college, hiring a handyman for the elder Brandts so Arthur could go, and when we moved back to the city, it bought Solli and me a house. The only thing the diet book didn't do, in fact, was catch up with Randall White; after that morning in the diner, no one ever saw him or his nephew again.

Bernie, who knew about crime on account of always be-

ing in the middle of trying to persuade criminals to write true crime books, said it was for the best, that White had gotten away with murder before and probably would have again, and that White's nephew was getting ready to be just as bad. Still, I get a funny feeling when I think about them disappearing the way they did, especially when I remember the look on Willard Brill's face as he talked about the damage White had done to people in Claremont.

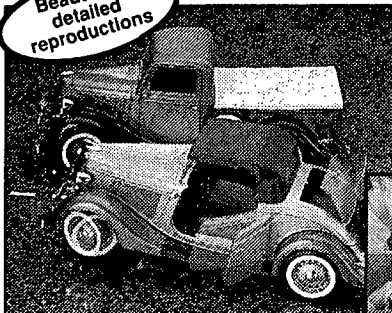
Willard was aware they were in the diner that morning; he could have seen them leave. He could have followed and caught up with them outside of town, and there were those two shots that day down in the ravine where no deer were likely to be: better grazing higher up, and not enough cover for them there during hunting season, as Arthur Brandt had explained to me when I asked why his father had gone as far up the mountain as he had.

But I do not know that Willard Brill did anything at all like what I am imagining, and I don't want to.

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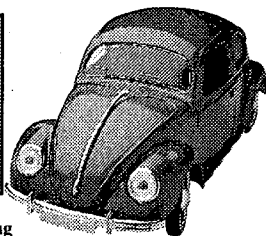


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UNSOLVED

by
Robert Kesling

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the June issue.

The police chief leaned back in his swivel chair and spoke to Detective Hopper. "Harry," he said, "I've got a reliable lead on who is dealing the drugs at the football games. The pusher is running a concession stand at the stadium. It's one of the Boldoni brothers."

"What!" exclaimed Hopper. "I thought they'd promised to give it up after their last conviction."

"Some never learn," sighed Chief Mahoney.

"I'll pick up the dealer at the game Saturday."

Patrick Mahoney frowned. "I'm afraid it's not that simple. You see, the five Boldoni brothers—Alfie, Bubba, Chaz, Danny, and Eddie—bought the concession contract. Each operates one of the little stands spaced around the stadium. From my information, four of them are going straight. As you know, they all look alike: black hair, swarthy complexions, five feet nine, heavysset. If we arrest the wrong one, he'll likely sue for false arrest, and meanwhile the guilty brother will take off."

"We could pull in all five and hope that one of them will squeal."

"I doubt that would work either, Harry. The Boldonis are bold-faced liars. No, you've got to catch the dealer in the act. Take some other detectives to watch every move made at those stands."

On Saturday afternoon Detective Hopper stationed five of his best assistants where each could keep a sharp lookout on one of the concession stands. They met after the game to compare notes.

Chief Mahoney attended the football game himself that afternoon, but his mind was on the drug problem. Nevertheless, he managed to stand and cheer when the team of his alma mater scored the winning touchdown with seconds of playing time left.

He returned to his office to find on his desk the following ten brief notes left there by Hopper's assistants:

- (1) Only the same five items were stocked by each brother. The profit from each sale was the same for each brother: coffee = 30¢; peanuts = 45¢; ice cream = 60¢; popcorn = 75¢; and hot dogs = 90¢. The total sales for any one item by one brother

- were exactly 50, 60, 70, 80, 90, or 100. No brother sold the same number of two different items, and no item had the same number of sales by more than one brother.
- (2) Each Boldoni brother operated from a differently colored stand—red, orange, yellow, white, and green. Each wore a shirt and tie from among those same colors, but none had a shirt and tie of the same color, nor did his shirt or tie match the color of his concession stand.
 - (3) The brother in the orange tie cleared the same profit on hot dogs that the one in the yellow shirt cleared on ice cream.
 - (4) Chaz sold twenty fewer bags of popcorn than did his brother in the yellow stand, but ten more than the one wearing the green tie; none of the three wore a white shirt.
 - (5) The brother in the orange shirt sold fewer hot dogs than did his brother in the green stand, but twenty more than Eddie. None of the three wore a white tie.
 - (6) The one wearing the red shirt made the same profit on coffee that he did on ice cream. He sold more popcorn than Alfie.
 - (7) The brother in the white stand sold eighty cups of coffee and made the same profit on peanuts that he did on popcorn.
 - (8) Bubba sold more peanuts than did Danny.
 - (9) At the end of the afternoon, four brothers had cleared exactly the same total profits; the one in the green tie made exactly six dollars more.
 - (10) No brother made a profit on any one item of exactly thirty-six dollars or seventy-five dollars.

Chief Mahoney puzzled over these notes for some time before breaking into a smile. Then he looked up to see Detective Hopper standing in the doorway.

"Well," he remarked, "from these notes left by your assistants I've figured out which brother operated which stand, but that still doesn't tell me who was the drug dealer."

"Oh," reported a jubilant Detective Hopper, "I caught him red-handed myself!"

"Okay, which one was it?" asked Mahoney.

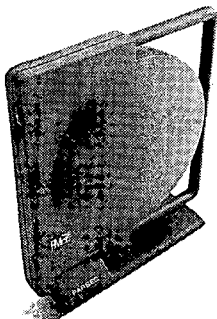
"The brother in the yellow stand," answered Hopper.

"Aha, so it was _____. Let's hope his arrest serves as a warning to the other Boldonis to stick to the terms of their probation."

Which brother was dealing drugs at the football game?

MAIL ★ ORDER ★ MALL

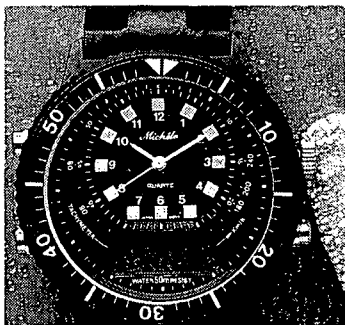
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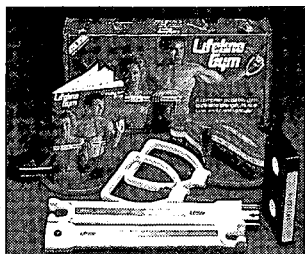
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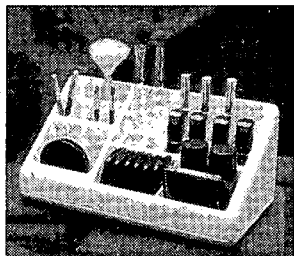


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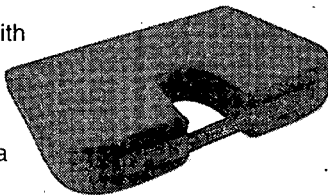


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FICTION

The Case of the Dumb Detective and the Humphrey Bogart Fanatic

James A. Noble



Illustration by Vlad Guzner

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“Please come in, Mark,” said Captain Evert. “You’d better shut the door behind you and have a seat.”

Evert stood and walked to the front of his desk. He leaned against the edge for a moment before he spoke.

“I’m sorry to have to call you in like this. I have some very bad news. I’ve just left a rather unpleasant meeting with Internal Affairs.

“Tomorrow, at precisely nine A.M., you are to be formally charged with withholding critical evidence in a murder investigation, mishandling said evidence, and . . .”

He reached back and picked up some papers from his desk. He read for a moment.

“... aiding and abetting possible criminal elements in the concealment of a felony.

“You will then be placed on immediate suspension pending further investigation and a subsequent hearing . . . et cetera, et cetera.”

Detective Sergeant Mark Murphy shrugged. “I suppose this is a bad time to ask for a raise.”

“This is no joke, Mark,” cautioned the captain. “They could take your badge.”

“This is about the Elaine Wesley murder, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” replied Evert. “I asked for this time to talk to you about it to determine if you have any possible explanation for your conduct.”

“How’d I.A. find out?”

“What kind of question is that? Are you implying you actually *did* these things?”

“Let me rephrase that. What makes them think I did all those things?”

Evert glanced at the papers again.

“They indicate they have some pretty convincing evidence, like audiotapes of your interrogation of the four prime suspects.”

Mark whistled. “Man, are those I.A. people fast. I just did those interviews early this morning. I was sure I had at least another day or two before I was put on the spot about that. Maybe *they* should all get raises. Anything else?”

Evert flipped a few pages.

“No, but they claim to have an ironclad case against you. They also characterize your questioning during the interrogations as ‘bizarre’ and ‘redundant.’”

They both had to laugh at that one. Captain Evert immediately turned serious again.

“Mark, I’ve known you and your father, rest his soul, for many, many years. You *are* my best detective. I no more be-

lieve this hogwash than you do, but you must have given the I.A. people good reason to make these kinds of accusations. Lay it out for me, and I'll do everything in my power to clear you of this nonsense."

"I appreciate that, captain," said Mark respectfully, "but I can assure you, right now there is something more important to worry about."

"What's that?" asked the captain.

"I.A. may want to send someone over to Elaine Wesley's apartment. They mustn't be allowed to do that."

Evert stood silent for a few moments.

"Trust me on this one, captain," said Mark.

"Okay. No problem," replied Evert. "Since her apartment is not an official crime scene, they can't touch anything there without coming to me first to seek a court-ordered search warrant. The buck stops here."

"Have you had a chance to hear those tapes?"

Captain Evert shook his head. "No, I'm afraid not. They've been impounded pending your hearing."

"No matter. I'll just have to explain my solution to the Wesley murder case."

"You've solved it? You know who the murderer is?"

"Yeah, I just need to collect a little more additional proof before tomorrow, and it's in the bag."

"How'd you figure it out? This case has almost no clues."

"There were enough. Let me start with the murder scene," said Mark, adjusting himself into a comfortable position in the chair. "We know that Elaine Wesley was employed as executive secretary to the four chief directors of MacGrawly Enterprises, a highly successful marketing firm. One of her jobs was to manage a pool of office talent from which she provided major services for the directors. We also know she worked by herself late on Friday nights in the company-owned Meadows highrise.

"Late last Friday, as she was walking between the elevator and her car on the second level of the underground parking lot, someone shot her with a .38-caliber gun. From the blood trail, we know she attempted to reach the safety of her car, but before she could unlock the door, she was shot four more times at close range with the same gun. Probably a revolver, since there were no shell casings.

"Witnesses, attracted by the gunfire, converged on the scene, and some relate hearing a car squealing tires as it tried

to rapidly leave the parking lot, but no one saw the car or the murderer. They found Elaine Wesley's body lying up against her locked car door."

"What about security in the underground parking lot?" asked the captain.

"There's only one guard, who is stationed in a small structure near one of the entrances to the lot. Unfortunately, there are six entrances and exits to the lot and seven large levels of parking. He patrols the lot only on weekends. To say they were understaffed would be an understatement. The guard heard the one shot, a pause, and then four rapid shots, but saw and heard nothing else.

"The only aspect of the security that's somewhat helpful is that all employees must use a pass card to raise a gate to get into and out of the lot, but no information is recorded by the system. Pass cards and codes are changed on a regular basis to weed out those cards lost, stolen, or retained by employees who are released.

"Because of a recent code and card change, all the cards have been accounted for, including Wesley's."

"So if the murderer had a car in the lot, he was probably one of the occupants of the Meadows building," noted Evert. "That helps a little, but there

must be a thousand people in that building."

"Eight hundred and fifty-six," said Mark, "not to mention the satellite offices of MacGrawly that have employees with pass cards also."

"Anything else?" sighed Evert.

"As far as the murder scene goes, nothing. No murder weapon, no prints, no eyewitnesses . . . nothing.

"The best clues come from the murder victim herself. Almost everyone we talked to said she was very aggressive and highly motivated. Some even called her ruthless. A few said she was money hungry and power hungry."

"Someone who might stop at nothing to get her way?" suggested Evert.

"Perhaps. But the best opportunity for clues comes from her obsession with Humphrey Bogart and his films. She spent a fortune on rare movie memorabilia and stage props actually used in some of Bogart's best films. She had a complete collection of all his movies on videotape. Some of her Bogart movie posters and movie props adorn her Meadows highrise office.

"Once she got in trouble for sending obscene threatening letters to a film producer who colorized *Casablanca*. She was

apparently outraged. She might have gone to jail if she hadn't settled out of court."

Evert was puzzled. "How does all that provide a clue to her murderer?"

"In and by itself, it doesn't. But the fact that everybody at MacGrawly knew she was a Bogart fanatic does."

"Huh?"

"You'll understand shortly," replied Mark. "Let me continue."

"We also know she demanded and received a fairly hefty salary; somewhere near ninety, a hundred thousand a year. Three months ago, she started depositing some *really* big checks into her accounts: twenty, thirty, forty thousand. No one at MacGrawly knows, or is willing to admit they know, where the money was coming from."

"They checked their books. No embezzlement, no mysterious accounts. Their books check out fine."

"Did she have any cash-producing investments or a sugar daddy or... illegal dealings or...?"

Mark shook his head at each suggestion. "None. And she didn't hit the lottery, break Vegas, or win at the Kentucky Derby."

"What about the accounts of the four chief directors she worked for?"

"Bingo. All four are very wealthy, and all four have secret accounts all over the world. They all *claim* their accounts are square, but we have no way of checking. None of them is willing to expose his account data."

"Was she intimate with any of the four?" asked Evert.

"Not that we can determine, but she did know them well enough to invite them, both separately and together, to her apartment on some weekend days. Mostly she just liked to show off her Bogart collection."

"So?"

Mark smiled. "You tell me."

Evert blew out a lungful of air. After a reflective moment, he said, "Blackmail seems most likely. I say she had some sort of incriminating information on one or more of the four and was bleeding them dry. He or they got tired of paying, so they plugged the hole draining their bank accounts, so to speak."

"I agree. And from the size of her deposits, that information must have been powerful stuff."

"Tell me more about the four suspects."

"Our four chief directors—George Morton, Patrick Franks, William Pickerson, and Ronald Ketterman—are about as secretive as their bank accounts. None of them has a

substantial alibi for his whereabouts during the time of the murder, so any one or more of them could have been involved.

"All four took the long road and worked their way up through the company's management structure by a series of lucky breaks, business savvy, competitor misfortunes, and just plain hard work. They also are described as ruthless and aggressive by people who don't want to be named. Try to get a line on their pasts and all you encounter is fog and darkness."

"Sounds like an ideal setup for blackmail to me," noted Evert. "So how do you think she became a murder victim?"

"Let's put ourselves in Elaine Wesley's place and think like she would think.

"She is in possession of certain information that could prove disastrous to her victim if it were used against him, so her victim pays a lot of money on a regular basis to keep her quiet . . . at first.

"If Elaine Wesley is smart, she will hide that incriminating information where it will be found or revealed if she suffered an unnatural death. She will then inform her victim that if anything were to happen to her the information *and her likely murderer* would be exposed by the hidden informa-

tion. Somehow she would have to provide a way we could locate that information."

"But she was murdered. Doesn't that suggest she didn't do that?"

"Maybe . . . but it could be she just didn't tell her victim. Or perhaps she had just thought up the idea. Maybe the blackmail victim didn't believe her. Perhaps the blackmail victim located the incriminating evidence and then decided to tie up the loose ends by silencing her."

"Right. But maybe she made copies."

Mark grinned. "Yes, the possibilities do seem endless, don't they? But no matter, because I think I can say that the murderer did not know that Elaine Wesley had hidden the incriminating information where the authorities would find it."

"So that's the significant evidence you're accused of withholding. Elaine Wesley made up some sort of 'dying clue' to the location of the incriminating information and her potential killer and kept it with her—a dying clue that her murderer might not notice but you found and have figured out. I hate to say this, Mark. You *are* guilty of withholding evidence."

Mark just waved it off. "I'll get to that later. First, take a look at the 'dying clue.'"

Mark reached into his pocket and pulled out a plastic bag. He removed a watch and a bracelet from the bag and placed them on the captain's desk.

Captain Evert returned to his desk chair and picked up the watch.

"Elaine Wesley's?"

"Yep."

The captain carefully studied it as he turned it in his hands.

"Woman's gold quartz watch, set to the right time, no alarm setting. Engraved on the back, let's see . . . *E.R.W. . . . R?*"

"Richards, her middle name."

Evert pulled on the expansion band. "Slim wrist, huh? Nothing here." He set the watch down and picked up the bracelet.

"Hers also?"

Mark nodded.

"Strange. It doesn't look like it was made to be a charm bracelet, but it's got one dangling from it. Some sort of a miniature gold bust. Looks Egyptian."

"It is. It's a miniature replica of a very famous piece of ancient Egyptian art. The portrait head sculpture of Nefertiti."

"Maybe she hid the black-mail information in a full-sized replica of this at her apartment. Did you check?"

"No bust. Sorry."

"Maybe the murderer entered her apartment and took it when he was looking for the incriminating information," suggested Evert, looking for a way to justify his idea.

Mark just smiled.

Evert set the bracelet down. "What makes you think these are dying clues, anyway? Lots of women wear wristwatches and charm bracelets."

"What if I told you she had them clutched in the palm of her right hand?"

"I'm a little more impressed."

"And what if I told you she was right-handed?"

"So what?"

"And say she had dropped her car keys in the parking lot before she had unlocked the car door."

Evert's eyebrows rose. "You mean she dropped her car keys just to clutch a watch and charm bracelet? I'd have to say she was leaving us a dying clue."

"Okay, so figure it out."

Evert stared down at the watch and charm bracelet.

"Nefertiti was an Egyptian queen, right?"

"Yeah, go on," prompted Mark.

"Wristwatch . . . time. Nefertiti lived a long time ago."

"You're straying. Think more about what we know of Elaine Wesley."

"Bogart fanatic."

"Okay, so?"

"Egyptian queen . . . Egypt is in Africa. Bogart, African queen. I've got it. The movie *The African Queen*! The watch? Her dying clue is for us to watch the movie *The African Queen*?"

A confused expression crossed the captain's face and just as quickly a look of concern replaced it. "We've got to go over to her apartment immediately. Her Humphrey Bogart videotape collection. She must have recorded her incriminating blackmail information and the identity of her potential killer on videotape over her movie tape of *The African Queen*."

Captain Evert jumped up and headed for the coat rack.

"Whoa, slow down," chuckled Mark. "That won't be necessary."

"You mean you already have the tape?"

"Well, no."

"But you have *seen* what's on the tape?"

"No."

Shocked, Captain Evert returned to his desk.

"Is someone picking it up for you?" he asked.

"No, but don't worry. I've taken care of it."

The captain shook his head. "What is the matter with you?"

You're giving the murderer a chance to destroy the only evidence that could lead us to his identity. Internal Affairs was right: You're in serious, serious trouble, my boy. All their charges are true."

"Right," said Mark, raising a finger for emphasis, "and if you'll think about all the charges against me along with the evidence you've just figured out here, you'll know exactly how I caught the murderer and why I'm totally innocent of all of those charges."

Evert sat dumbfounded for a few moments. "You caught the murderer?"

"Well, like I said before, I know who it is, and he won't get far."

"You'll be charged and suspended tomorrow morning," Evert pointed out. "Isn't that cutting it a bit close?"

Mark just laughed.

Evert sighed. "I suppose this means I've got to buy again tonight?"

"No, of course not. You can wait until my suspension hearing in, oh, about two weeks to find out the solution to this mystery."

"I just might do that."

"No, you won't. You know you'd explode from curiosity before the night is over. Very messy."

"Kelly's?"

"Kelly's."

The short walk to the tavern was interrupted when the captain suddenly realized an important fact. He stopped short.

"Good heavens, you've been charged with revealing significant evidence to our prime suspects. You told the suspects about Wesley's dying clue."

"My, you *are* getting fast. If I ever intend to sucker any more drinks out of you in the future, I'd better find a closer bar."

Mark continued walking. The captain jump-stepped to catch up.

"You told the suspects, but you didn't tell your own department?"

Mark grinned. "Just call me 'bizarre' and 'redundant.'"

Kelly's was crowded again. A young couple who had only eyes for each other had quite innocently taken the captain's usual table. Obviously, they were not aware of the unwritten rule about leaving the captain's table alone at quitting time; however, they would not be disturbed.

Mark found some empty stools at the end of the bar. The owner, bartender, and tavern's namesake set the familiar chilled drafts on the bar without being asked and took the captain's money.

"So you're paying again, hey, captain?" said Kelly. "Mark

solved another case for you, right?"

"Gee, Kelly. How do you manage to find time to run your *own* business and still concern yourself with everybody else's?" asked Evert.

"My, aren't we touchy tonight," responded Kelly, who ambled away.

Evert rested his elbow on the bar and just stared at Mark as he sipped his beer. Finally Mark got the message and polished off his glass in two quick gulps.

"Okay, let me have it," said the captain.

Mark turned on the bar stool and looked Evert square in the eye.

"There's nothing on the videotape *The African Queen* except a really excellent movie," stated the detective firmly.

"Maybe the clue is buried in the plot of the movie," suggested Evert.

"That's not possible," said Mark, "because Elaine Wesley never left a dying clue."

"What?"

"I said . . ."

"I heard you, I heard you," said Evert thoughtfully. "Good heavens. You made it up, didn't you?"

"The whole thing," confirmed Mark. "The watch and the gold bracelet were hers all right, but I bought the charm myself at a

curio shop at the museum and had it attached to the bracelet. And of course she wasn't clutching them in her hand at the murder scene either."

Evert sat up and slapped the bar. "Now I get it. You told all the suspects about the 'dying clue,' hoping they would figure it out. The murderer would then go back to Wesley's apartment to try to steal the incriminating *African Queen* videotape. Who's doing the stake-out?"

"Patrol Officers Gale Watts and Sam Krugerson are doing a plainclothes surveillance. I've also instructed them to enter Elaine Wesley's apartment and disable her VCR."

"Hey, that's illegal. . . . Now I'll have to pretend I didn't hear that."

"I can't have the murderer simply play the tape in her apartment and discover there's nothing on it but a good movie. He might put it back. I want him to have it on him when he leaves and is picked up."

"You said you knew who the murderer is."

"It'll be Ronald Ketterman," said Mark. "I'm certain."

"The murderer? Ketterman? What makes you so sure?"

Mark took a swallow from his second beer before answering.

"The interrogation of each of the suspects. You have to put yourself in their place.

"All the suspects knew Wesley was a Bogart fan and that she had his movies on videotape. Remember, they have all been to her apartment.

"First, imagine you're one of the suspects who is innocent of the crime and is not her black-mail victim. Here I am, the dumb detective, showing you Wesley's supposed dying clue and asking you if you can figure it out for me. Since you're innocent, you give it a good try. After a minute or two, if you still haven't figured it out, I drop a few leading questions like, 'Isn't that Nefertiti, an ancient queen of Egypt?' or 'Isn't Egypt in Africa?'"

"Like the way you gave me hints."

"Sort of," said Mark, "except in their case, I pretend I really don't know what the dying clue means. After a while, with all the hints I'm dropping, even the most brain-dead suspect will figure it out.

"The big difference is that an innocent suspect will eventually explain the solution of the dying clue to me, the dumb detective.

"On the other hand, the guilty suspect won't want to reveal that he has solved it because he thinks I'll go get the tape and he will be incriminated as the murderer by what's on it. As long as the

murderer thinks we haven't solved the mystery of the dying clue, he'll believe he still has time to retrieve the tape and destroy it."

"So Morton, Franks, and Pickerson figured out the dying message?" asked Evert.

"Right, and without much help, either. Ketterman, on the other hand, played dumb no matter how many subtle hints I gave him. After a short while, I had to stop before he figured out I was finessing him.

"Internal Affairs must have thought I had lost my mind when they listened to the audiotapes of each of my interrogations.

"First they heard me ask each of the suspects the same questions and provide basically the same hints about the watch and bracelet, neither of which was ever submitted as evidence as far as I.A. was concerned.

"Then they heard me act surprised and pleased at least three times when the innocent suspects figured the dying clue out.

"Finally, to top it all off, they heard me call in Officer Burk and instruct him to go to Wesley's apartment and get us *The African Queen* video. Of course, Burk was just playing along as I had instructed him to do earlier. He never actually left the building.

"Before each suspect was released, he was also instructed not to discuss the details of the case or the clues with anyone."

Evert rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Why did you include Burk?"

"Oh, nothing important. I just wanted to make sure that Morton, Franks, and Pickerson thought we were retrieving the tape so they wouldn't be tempted to go over to Wesley's apartment out of curiosity and mess up my trap.

"Of course, since Ketterman never admitted to solving the dying clue, I didn't use the ploy with Burk. Ketterman left the interrogation thinking he knew more than I did and still had time to get to the tape. He *should* have wanted to get his hands on that videotape very quickly before I 'figured it out' later on."

Captain Evert chuckled lightly.

"I can just imagine I.A. listening to the interrogation tapes. I bet they occasionally thought they were playing the same tape over and over," he said. "But obviously, since you created the watch and charm bracelet dying clue, it isn't really evidence at all. So out the window goes I.A.'s withholding-evidence charge. And you certainly weren't aiding in the

concealment of a felony. You were exposing it."

"Look, here comes Gale," said Mark, nodding toward the door. "She's smiling. Must be good news."

Patrol Officer Gale Watts was obviously happy. She sat down next to the captain and ordered a beer from Kelly.

"We got Ketterman, captain. Just like Mark said. He was all dressed up like some sort of secret agent. He had the tape in his trenchcoat pocket when he came out of Wesley's apartment."

"Did he 'fess up to Wesley's murder?" asked Evert.

Watts shook her head. "Naw, not at first. All he wanted was his lawyer. So I gave Mark's little plan a shot, and he sang like the proverbial canary."

Evert turned slowly to Mark. "Mark's little plan?"

"Yeah," responded Watts. "I told the jailer I was going to step out to play the videotape, and I said it loud enough for Ketterman to hear."

"I just waited fifteen minutes. Then I went back to Ketterman's cell and shook the tape at him and said, 'Man, you're in big trouble now.' Just like that."

"Next thing I know, the man is spilling the whole ugly story. And just in time, too. The lawyer slithers in a minute later."

"What did Elaine Wesley have on him?" asked Mark.

Watts shook her head. "You ain't gonna believe this. Murder, double murder, in fact. Ketterman hired a hit guy to stage an accident and take out a competitor for one of those big cushy chief director jobs at MacGrawly. Competitor croaks, and Ketterman gets the job. Nobody's the wiser."

"After a while, the hit guy gets a little greedy and decides to blackmail Ketterman. As you well know by now, it just ain't *healthy* to blackmail Mr. Ronald Ketterman. Ketterman cleans the hit guy's clock and dumps the body in an empty lot down by the Lawson Building."

"I remember that case. The Williams murder," said Evert, "back in '92. Never solved."

Gale continued. "So Elaine Wesley apparently dug up the aforementioned dirt on Ketterman and was blackmailing the stuffing out of him just like the hit guy."

"Too bad she didn't have a *real* doomsday testimonial on Ketterman," said Mark. "He might have thought twice about murdering her."

"Oh, I don't know," said Evert, delivering a slap on the back of his favorite detective. "You gave her a pretty good one

and we got her murderer because of it."

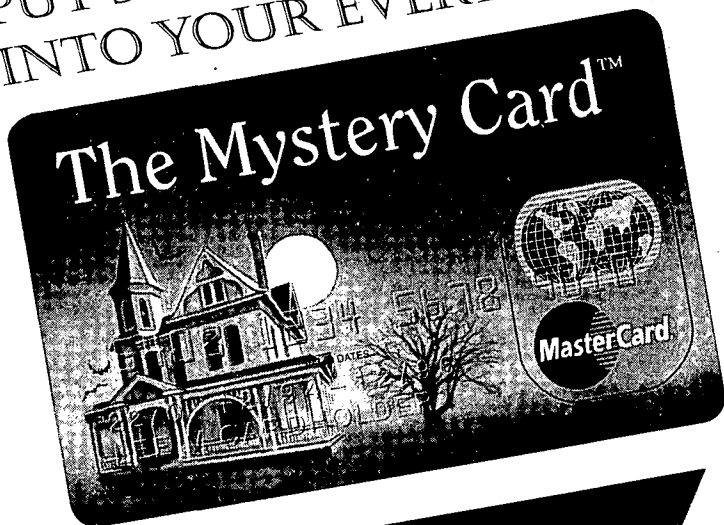
"Hey, Watts," said Kelly, stepping up to their end to deliver her beer. "Did I hear you say you know someone who cleans clocks? You think he could clean mine in the back? As long as he's cheap enough, of course . . ."

Gale sniffed. "Sure, Kelly. For you, it's free," she chuckled. "How about it, captain? Can we let Ketterman loose long enough to clean Kelly's clock?"

"Of course," replied Evert. "Oh, and, Kelly, if you want a thorough job, be sure to tell him your favorite movie is *The African Queen*. Humphrey Bogart has a special meaning to him."

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FICTION

Death and Violets

Jas. R. Petrin



Illustration by Richard Loehle

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“What I like to do is start with a body,” Carp said. “Kill somebody off on a Monday morning, say with a gun or an axe. That sets me up for the week and gets me going. Usually.”

Olga glanced doubtfully out of the kitchen at him, past the shiny stove and the countertop she'd tidied, past all the leaded, stained glass statuettes she had contributed to the world of art over the years (she didn't call them statuettes, she called them Creations), past the staircase that led to the loft, to the dull plastic hood of Carp's word processor monitor.

“So what are you waiting for?”

“Inspiration,” Carp said peevishly.

“Oh. That.”

Olga carefully carried her latest Creation across the room to the spot she had prepared for it, a small marble and rosewood base waiting on a smoked glass shelf with slender, gilded legs. “I certainly never have that problem,” she said. “Just look at this. I call it *Flowers of All Seasons*. It took me three days.”

“It looks it.”

“What did you say?”

“I said it looks fit. Fit for a king.” And Carp added quickly, “I've been sitting here for

weeks and I haven't strung six decent words together.”

Olga was furrowing her brow. Carp knew she was about to volunteer an annoying unsolicited observation.

Which she did.

“Seems to me you're going about it all wrong. Seems to me most murders aren't inspired, they just happen. Somebody gets provoked, all steamed up, they turn around—boom!”

“Boom, huh?”

“Far as I can see.”

“You're an authority?”

“I read the paper.”

Carp snorted.

“Then you don't know much. Newspaper murders have nothing to do with story murders.” He went back to staring at his screen with its winking, taunting, annoying little cursor, feeling no more inspired than when he'd sat down at it two weeks ago. “Newspaper writing's one thing. My kind of writing is something else.”

“You can say that again.”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“Oh, just the things you write. People going around killing one another. Violating one another. And like that.”

“I'll violate you in a minute!”

Her eyes opened up.

“Oh, my. Don't you sound like a marauding Viking warrior. Well, go ahead and attack me

if it'll get you past this... whatchamacallit... this writer's crock."

"*Block! It's a writer's block!*"

"Whatever. Then maybe you'll go back to your old self again. Miserable only half the time." She put her hands on her hips. "Well. I'm waiting. I'll give you a head start before I try to jump out the window."

"Accommodating, aren't you?"

"Anything to stop you sitting here day after day with your face hanging out. You're driving me crazy."

"You don't know what crazy is."

"I know you."

"Will you cut it out?" Carp barked in annoyance. "How do you expect me to work?"

He pushed back from his desk and stalked angrily off to the window. Halfway there, his stockinged feet went out from under him, and he went down on the polished wood floor flat on his rump. He yelped with pain. "Jeez! Do you think you could make these damn floors any more dangerous? Why don't you really polish them up? Rub a few quarts of tenthirty oil into them?"

"You ought to be pleased that I keep a nice house," Olga said without sympathy. "And if you'd wear the slippers I

bought you, things like that wouldn't happen."

Rubbing his backside, Carp limped to the window and glared fiercely out at the lake. It had been as dark as pitch outside when he sat down at his work this morning; now the sun was climbing rapidly, as if it were purposely taunting him about his lack of progress. Rosy light was beginning to touch the cedars on the point, the dock, the peak of the boathouse roof that thrust up through the leaves by the water. It was a peaceful scene. A scene without—

"Conflict," he muttered.

"Huh?"

"Conflict! Write a story, any story, and conflict must always be present!"

"It's present every place you are, that's for sure."

"It's *not* present in the *story* I'm trying to write."

"That's hard to believe."

"Take the two of us in this room, right now," Carp said, thinking out loud. "Say you and me were the start of a story. Two people nattering at each other—"

"I don't natter, you do."

"There'd have to be some contention..."

"You're the contention."

"Something making us snarl..."

"You snarl all the time, like a bear with a pinched whazoo."

"Talking at cross-purposes ..."

"That's you, all right."

"Brisk dialogue leading into a mystery ..."

Olga moved off, irritably dusting her many stained glass Creations.

"It's a mystery to me why I put up with you. You've always been mean as a gravel road, but now you're worse. Snapping and sniping. Blathering about murder. How do you expect us to have a meaningful relationship?"

Carp closed his eyes and tipped his head forward against the glass.

"Body. I need a body. I need to slip it in somewhere so I can go ahead and jack up the tension ..."

"And now this writer's crock has got you so depressed you won't even set foot out the door. You just pace the room all day, back and forth, staring at that nasty dumb screen. Pacing and staring. Staring and pacing ..."

"Keep jacking up the tension ..."

Olga said, "See? Here I am trying to be serious, and there you are in Jack the Ripper Land. We can't even carry on an intelligent conversation."

"Get the readers' backs to the wall, up on their toes, the book in their fists, eyeballs bulging and gasping for breath ..."

"Eyeballs don't gasp."

"Ready to yell ..."

"I'm ready to yell right now."

"Then—SPLANG!"

Olga looked at him.

"What?"

"Splang."

"What does that mean?"

"It means somebody gets it."

"Gets what?"

"You know. Busted off."

"Huh?"

"Killed! Whacked! It's gang-speak for 'murdered!'"

Olga stared at him, slowly shaking her head. She had never understood why Carp couldn't write happy, charming things, cosy little snippets she could point out proudly to her friends in the *Ladies' Home Journal*. She plucked her handbag off the kitchen counter and clutched it to her breast with both hands.

"I'll just tell you something. Some days for fifteen cents I'd bust you off. But that's not my way. Life is what I'm all about. Trying to *live* is what I'm about. And if you want my opinion—"

"Which I don't."

"—what you ought to do is come *with* me."

"Where?"

"Into town. You can't grow violets in a vacuum, my art

teacher used to say, and if you've run out of people worth killing in your mind, then obviously you've got to go out and stock up on some new material. There's plenty out there that could use a good busting off. Some real nasties. Pick one out, cart him home, and murder him—in your head, of course. You could do it. Lord knows you got the space for it."

"Space?"

"In your head."

Carp looked sour.

"There's nothin' in that town but stray dogs an' pickup trucks, and lately the whole place has that smell, that god-awful smell. It's all you can do to breathe when the wind comes over that new Radek plant. Whew! What a stink!"

"There's all kinds of stinkers in the world," Olga said, eyeing him.

"Liquid fish, he makes there. Can you beat it? *Liquid fish!* Some kind of fertilizer. So if you want to spend your day in a town that smells like liquid fish, you go right ahead, but count me out. Just the thought of it turns me the last shade of green."

"Oh, for heaven's sake. And you from Hecla. A fishing town."

"There's lots of Hecla folks in End of Main, and lots from Riverton and Gimli. And they don't

like the smell either. They're mad as hornets. Pete Melynchuk told me about it last week when he came by collecting empty beer bottles. He told me folks in End of Main have been trying to get that place shut down."

"Is he one of them?"

"Hell, no. Him and his pals landed jobs at the place, right after the town cut off their welfare. Radek was lucky to get them."

"I'll say. Those men are ideal for a liquid fish plant. They got a smell of their own that would take the paint off a picket fence. They might even go for liquid fish. Spray it behind their ears each morning from out of an aerosol can." Olga shrugged. "Only now, I guess, they'll have to hope the welfare starts up again."

Carp peered at her.

"Why?"

"Radek did close. Maybe for good. You didn't know that? No, I guess you wouldn't, moping around here all day. Well, what happened, Mrs. Wortle went and got herself killed. *Ivy* Wortle. You know the woman with the curves all around? She was the one leading the charge against the place, hollering about it for weeks and writing letters. Then all of a sudden, there she was, tucked in a fish bin herself at the Radek plant

with a bump on her head the size of a gull egg, and the breath squeezed out of her. Suffocated."

"Who wouldn't be?"

"I mean *murdered*. And Robideau's arrested Radek, and shut down the plant."

Carp gave her a critical look.

"You knew about this and didn't tell me?"

"I *am* telling you. And I told you yesterday, only you weren't listening, as usual. And anyway, you'd find things like that out for yourself if you went out into the real world and didn't sit around waiting to get your news from a beer bottle man." She stood in the doorway with her handbag over her arm. "I'm going out into the real world right now to have lunch with Claudia Webb. *The* Claudia Webb. The one that works for Chief Robideau. You could find out all about it from her—if you're interested."

"Where are you meeting her?"

"At Gunther Schoss's street cafe. His Alpine Inn."

"Pooh. Why there?"

"Because we like to help Gunther out, that's why. We'd like to see him make a go of it, and you know how hard it is for him with that bad leg. Now, are you coming or not?"

"Not."

Carp watched her go out the door and a moment later heard the squeak of her car door and the zing of her starter motor missing the first couple of times.

Ivy Wortle dead? Radek in jail? The fish plant closed? All this going on and he hadn't heard one word about it?

Carp took his bottle of gin from the sideboard and helped himself to a big, fat swallow, closed his eyes, and squinched them tight while the liquid fire slid down into his gut. He took another look at the winking cursor of his word processor, then chased Olga down the driveway and jumped into her car.

““N^{ow} remember,” Olga warned him, “Claudia’s my friend. Go easy on her. Go ahead and ask questions, but be nice about it.”

“I’m always nice.”

“Sure you are. You’d drive splinters under her nails with a wooden mallet if I let you. You got to be nice to Claudia or she’ll shut right up.”

“Only way to shut that woman up is to drive a wooden stake through her heart,” Carp muttered.

“See? There you go. That’s exactly what I mean.”

At the Alpine Inn they found Claudia Webb already drinking cappuccino at one of the tables. Gunther Schoss had dragged out onto the sidewalk in a brave attempt to glue a patch of Europe onto a small prairie town that was squeezed between farmland, marshes, and lake. The place had French rococo wrought-iron chairs. It had Bavarian music and Italian wine. It had red and white checked tablecloths, firmly secured with safety pins against the prairie northwesterlies that might one day blow the entire culinary experiment out into the middle of Netley Marsh.

On each table was a small vase with a fresh violet and a bit of ribbon. Another of Schoss's ideas. Each week or so he featured a different flower. He drove down to the greenhouses in Selkirk every Sunday and got them himself, picking up whole flats of them and hauling them home. Up until yesterday it had been daisies.

Gunther was an eager host. He hobbled around on his sturdy Malacca cane, cheerfully greeting and serving his customers. Carp didn't like Schoss. There were too many vowels in his alphabet.

"Yooor zah vary fierce kooos-tooomers—za vary fierce ones sinze za Big Stink." He posi-

tioned chairs for Carp and Olga and tugged menus out from under his cane. "Zank goodness foor zat Mrs. Woo-ortle."

"She's dead," Claudia Webb reminded him, taking the chewing gum out of her mouth and sticking it under the table edge.

Gunther's sharp blue eyes followed her every motion, and his cropped head bobbed.

"Shoor. But a wuunerful wooman. She toook away za *Big Stink!*" Gunther emphasized the last few words with great emotion, as if he'd just decided to name a Salzburg sandwich after the murdered woman.

They ordered the special, and as Gunther hobbled cheerfully off to fetch it, Claudia Webb picked the violet out of the tiny vase and spread her napkin over it with a troubled frown.

"What's wrong, dear?" Olga asked.

"I can't bear to look at violets now, that's all."

"Why ever not?"

"I—I can't tell you. I promised the chief. But it's like a funeral flower. I don't want to think about it." She threw back her shoulders and drew a huge breath of spring air into her lungs. "But it is better now, isn't it? You can breathe again, now the plant's closed down and the chief's got the case all

solved, took and clapped that awful Radek behind bars."

"Still in the slammer, is he?" Carp snorted. "That dope Robideau must be pretty sure of himself for a change."

Claudia appealed briskly to Olga.

"Tell him if he's going to insult Chief Robideau, he'll have to eat his lunch somewhere else."

Olga glowered at Carp. "If you—"

"I heard, I heard. You don't have to hit me with a stick."

"What a shame," Claudia said. She jerked her chair to one side so she could address herself entirely to Olga. "You ought to of heard the hollering when Chief Robideau brought Radek in."

"Who was yelling, dear?"

"Well, Radek, to begin with. Just bellowing after we took and tossed him in the cell." She might have been Robideau's deputy rather than his clerk. "And not ten minutes later Tom Wortle came storming in. *He* didn't leave a word unsaid, I can tell you."

"Tom Wortle? That would be Mrs. Wortle's son?"

"Nope. Her cousin from Hnausa. The one with the nose? Well! I thought he was going to break the front window."

"With his nose?"

"No. With Radek. Drag him out of that cell and just drive him right clean through. And then *Steve* Wortle showed up—"

"Ivy's brother?"

"Nope. Her brother-in-law. Just a little fellow, but having ten fits. Hopping around the police station in his teeny black shoes like a flamenco dancer, his hands fisted up and swinging."

"Did he hit anything?"

Claudia took her salad plate from Gunther.

"Just the chief's big old desk lamp that looks like some sort of moose or a cow, the one that he won at the Legion Bingo, all four corners? Punched that lamp's lights out for good, Steve Wortle did. It was awful."

"And where was Clarence while this three-ring circus was going on?" Carp interrupted. "Clarence Wortle, Ivy's husband."

"Yes, what about Clarence?" Olga asked.

"Clarence? What could *he* do? Only stand there all smitten with grief, eyes like two cherries stuck in a fallen cake. My heart went out to him. His lovely wife snatched away in the best blush of womanhood—"

"I never knew that woman to blush," Carp put in. "I didn't think she had a blush in her,

the necklines on some of those tops she used to wear. That orange one? It was like seeing the Tiger Hills coming down the street at you sometimes."

"—and what's poor Mr. Wor-tle got to cling to now, that's what I'd like to know? Not to mention her friends—mostly men friends, but she wasn't prejudiced. And the Netley Singers will miss her voice. She could pretty near shake the windows loose when she took a good lungful of air."

"That doesn't surprise me," Carp said.

"Poor Chief Robideau," Claudia said. "It even affected him. You could see it was all he could do to keep from slipping into Radek's cell and clobbering the man."

Carp said, "It's usually all Robideau can do to keep from slipping into a coma."

Claudia bristled. "Stop taking cheap shots at Chief Robideau! He's the best thing ever happened to this town. Putting his life on the line every day to protect ungrateful people like you from bloodthirsty criminals!"

"I never noticed any blood-thirsty criminals around here."

"That proves my point, don't it?" Her double chin trembled angrily. "You'll laugh out the other side of your face when

Chief Robideau gets this case all solved."

"I thought you said it *was* solved."

"It's *almost* solved."

"I bet he hasn't even begun to solve it. I bet I could solve it before he does."

"Well, why don't you just go ahead and do it, then?" Claudia Webb swung around to appeal to Olga. "Can't you *do* something about this man?" She dragged her plate even farther away from Carp, as if he might contaminate her food. "I'm not going to put up with him very much longer! You tell him that!"

"She's not going to put up with you, Carp. Now please be quiet and eat your sandwich."

Carp snorted. "I don't think I want it. It's got an aftertaste to it—like liquid fish or something." He stood up. "I'm going to amble across to the Netley and have a beer and a garlic sausage. I know when I'm not wanted."

"You ought to," Claudia Webb said acidly. "You must get plenty of practice."

As he left, Carp nodded at Gunther Schoss, who was hovering nearby, grinning broadly.

Carp didn't go directly to the Netley. He stopped in first at the police station to try to find out just what the real facts were, and maybe catch a

glimpse of Radek, a man from Broad Valley whom he'd never clapped eyes on before.

As he came in the door, Chief Robideau glanced up at him, continuing an attempt to dig a Roloids tablet out of a giant family-sized jar by Claudia Webb's desk. He shook the jar, muttered, finally chased a tablet down with his large, blunt forefinger, popped it into his mouth, and munched it. He nodded at Carp and just had time to say, "G'morning," when a sudden outburst of hollering from the back made him turn away and stalk into the narrow aisle that separated the two holding cells from the administration area.

Carp followed. A sturdy man in a plaid sports coat was making all the noise.

"You lemme outa here, chief!" Radek bellowed, glaring from between clenched hands that gripped the iron bars on either side of his face. "You lemme out *now*!"

"I'd like to let you out, Mr. Radek," the chief told him, "but I got a job to do."

"You're holding me and not charging me. You can't do that and you know it." He looked at Carp. "Mister! You tell him!"

Radek was right, of course. He might be Robideau's prime suspect, but without some hard evidence, Robideau would have

to let him go, even though the guy could slip away and never be found again. Robideau didn't have the resources to keep people under surveillance.

"Don't I get due process?" Radek wailed. "Don't I get no lawyer? Don't I get breakfast?"

"He's got a point, chief," Carp said. "Do you have a case against him?" He smiled pleasantly, hoping to learn what the chief had found out so far.

Robideau drew up a straight-backed wooden chair that stood beside the drink machine, pushed it close to the bars, sat down, and folded his hands over the back. "Tell me again what you were doing day before yesterday, from the time you got up till midnight."

"You can't interrogate me without a lawyer."

"I'm not interrogating, I'm asking."

"What's the difference?"

"About three feet of rubber hose."

Radek turned to Carp.

"Did you hear that? Police intimidation. Police mental brutality. I could sue him down to his socks if I was that kind of a guy!"

"That's about all you'd get out of it, too," the chief said dryly. "A pair of socks."

"Anyways, I already answered that question ten million times, that's all."

"Then one more time won't make much difference, will it?"

Radek groaned and sat down on the bunk with his face in his hands.

"I got up at five thirty. I don't remember much after that till I had something to eat, about ten o'clock."

"That's an awful big blank spot in your day."

"I *get up* early but I don't *wake up* till a whole lot later."

"Sure. So you had something to eat. What then?"

"I walked my dog by the marsh. Came back home. Went out for a drive and got back around two thirty."

"A drive where?"

"Nowhere. Everywhere. Just a drive."

"Anybody see you?"

"I already told you—no!"

"And you spent the rest of the day puttering around your place, and nobody saw you doing that either, right?"

"Not unless they was lookin' in my windows. Some sort of a peepin' Tom." Radek got up and shoved his red nose through the bars, grinning strangely. "Why don't you run an ad in the paper asking all the peepin' Toms if they'd mind coming in to get beat with a hose. A few of 'em might like that."

"You puttered around—"

"I puttered around till supper, made myself some Kraft

Dinner, then watched TV till I hit the sack, ten thirty, eleven o'clock."

"That's all you can tell me?"

"That's all she wrote."

"You never went to Schoss's cafe?"

"No. Why are you asking me that?"

"Never went to the plant?"

"Never went near it. I told you, the only ones there all day was those three losers I hired. Why aren't *they* locked up, that's what I want to know. Why aren't you threatening *them* with a rubber hose?"

"Because they have no motive and you do. Ivy Wortle was trying to shut down your plant. That would have cost you plenty. I think you were getting pretty near the end of your rope with her."

"You got that right. But I didn't touch her. I didn't touch *nobody*. I didn't do nothing, just like I told you."

"You lead a dull life, Mr. Radek."

"So what!"

"No friends. No family. No . . . uh . . . women?"

"If I had women, chief, or knew where to get 'em, I sure as heck wouldn't tell you."

"Even if you were under suspicion of murder?"

"Don't kiss and tell, that's my motto." Radek grinned lewdly.

Robideau shook his head, turned and looked at Carp.

"What do you think I should do with this guy?"

"I think you have to let him go," Carp said. "Unless, like I said, you've got a stronger argument against him than you've made so far."

The chief got up and opened the door of the cell. "All right, Mr. Radek, you can go. But not too far, okay?"

"You mean I don't get no free brekky?"

"All we serve here is a cold fried egg sandwich. It comes from down the street. By the time it gets here, it's a lot like a squirt of Elmer's glue mixed with a fistful of plumber's putty. But if you want one, stay in the cell and I'll have Claudia order it for you, soon as she gets back."

Radek pushed out into the corridor with his jacket bundled under his arm.

"On second thought, I'll pass." He clumped through into the outer office and stopped by Claudia's desk to pull his jacket on. "You really do think I killed that woman, don't you? Well, I didn't. I want you to know that." He turned and fixed Robideau with a clear-eyed gaze. "I ain't no murderer, chief, and you can take that to the bank."

He slammed out into the street.

Carp looked at Robideau.

"What now?"

The chief raised his heavy eyebrows and shook his head.

"What about the Wortle clan?"

"They've all got alibis. Unshakable. I guess my next step is to go have a talk with the End of Main gang."

Carp knew who that was—Pete Melynychuk, Wilmer Gates, and Chuck Lang.

The chief pulled a file drawer open, took out a folder, and sat down at Claudia's typewriter. "You heard Radek. They were working at the plant at about the time it must have happened." He shook his head with a lack of conviction. "But I dunno."

"What don't you know, chief?"

"Could be they saw something, but I can't imagine any one of them being involved in this thing. The only thing those guys know how to kill is time."

Carp beat it fast down the street and found Pete and the boys at their usual table in the back of the Netley bar. Pete was lecturing his three grizzled companions, and he smacked his hand down in a puddle of spilled beer with a splat.

"All's I'm sayin' is, look at the situation. That's all. Just *look* at it."

The others—Wilmer, Chuck, old Wolverton—stared blearily into space with unfocused eyes while Pete went ahead and sketched in the scene for them. The air smelt vaguely of fish.

"Here's a townful of people, right? All they been telling us the last ten years is 'Get a job!' So finally we do that. An' what do *they* do?" He brought his hand down smartly again, this time sending a thin splatter of beer down the front of Chuck Lang's shirt. "They turn around an' start an uproar an' try to get the plant closed down. Somebody gets murdered, an' we get laid off before we draw our first paycheck. Is that *sensible*? Is that *fair*? Is that what you call *good citizenship*?"

"It's what I call pitiful," Chuck Lang said, though he didn't sound too put out about it.

"I call it awful," Wilmer Gates put in. But he had a rather serene look on his face.

Wolverton shifted his tent-pole shoulders and nodded so forcibly it looked as if his head were going to topple off his bony neck and roll away among the tables.

Carp said, "Mind if I sit down?"

"Sit any direction you want to, but if you sit down here you

got to buy us a round," Pete informed him.

Carp signaled the waitress and said, "Since you guys are talking about the murder, you might as well know that Robideau just let Radek go. He can't hold the guy, he's got nothing on him. So you know what that means."

They stared at him, waiting for it, four blank faces over a table-load of beer.

"It means you guys are next."

"What d'you mean, 'next'?"

"Next in line for questioning." Carp held up his hands as they began to object. "Don't shoot the messenger, boys. But you were all at the plant that day—three of you were—and, well, the chiefs got to nail somebody's hide to the wall, doesn't he?"

"You're talkin' crazy," Wilmer Gates said indignantly. "Why would we kill Ivy Worle?"

"She sang at the Legion once," Chuck reminded him.

"Well, yeah. But you don't murder someone for that. I mean, in her case you might, but she sounded like she was already wounded."

Carp said, "The point is, she was trying to close Radek's plant. You guys would have lost your jobs. I just heard you complaining about it."

"Heck," Chuck said, "we like to complain. Far as I'm concerned, Ivy would of been doing us a favor." He pumped an elbow into Wolverton, who woofed softly.

"That's easy to say. *After* you've killed her."

"But we *didn't* kill her."

"Hold it a second," Pete Melynychuk said. "Carp's got something. If we don't watch our step, we could wind up breakin' stones in the Big House."

Carp smiled. "You're behind the times. They don't call it the Big House any more, and they don't break stones. They watch color TV and study for college degrees."

"That don't sound bad," Chuck said appreciatively. "I couldn't afford college, and I ain't got a TV."

Wilmer snorted. "If we go there, I'll watch the TV, and you study for the degree."

"Here's a better idea," Carp said. "You guys start helping me right now to find the real killer, and maybe you won't have to worry about it. Tell me what you're going to tell Robideau."

Wilmer took a huge swallow of beer, then looked at Pete Melynychuk. "What're we gonna tell Robideau, Pete?"

"The truth. That we don't know nothin', didn't see

nothin', didn't do nothin' that whole entire day."

"He'll believe the last part of that," Carp said, "but I'm not so sure about the rest of it. You must have seen or heard *something*."

Pete knitted his brows in concentration. "Most of the day I worked in the receiving room—"

"Slept, he means," Chuck said, elbowing Wolverton again.

Pete scowled. "What about you? They could of heard you snoring in Fisher Branch if I'd opened the door."

Carp shook his head. "Come on, guys, get your stories straight. Do it before Robideau starts in on you."

They sat up straighter. Pete slapped his hand down again, refreshing the stain on Chuck Lang's shirt.

"Now's I think of it, I do remember something. Middle of the day, I heard a car drive up."

"Now we're getting somewhere," Carp said. "Go on."

"Well, you can't see nothin' outa that receiving room. There's no windows. But there's vents high up, an' I heard the car drive in and stop, an' the doors open and close. Twice I heard 'em. One door, then the other, like two people had droven up and got out."

"There's no such word as droven," Chuck corrected him.

"There must be," Pete retorted. "You just used it."

Carp overrode their bickering. "Come on, keep it coming. We're starting to dig up bait here. Dig me up enough, and I can go fishing. You heard a car drive up and heard two people get out. What else?"

"Nothing else. I turned around and went back to work."

"Back to sleep he means," Chuck said. "But listen. I might know something about that, too." He leaned on the table. "I went out to toss some garbage in the bin—oh, maybe two o'clock—and I happened to glance up the side of the building, and I seen a car parked there, up close to the side door."

"What kind of a car?"

"I could only just see the back bumper of it. It was on the other side of the garbage bins."

"Well, what kind of a *bumper* was it then?"

"Just a bumper."

"Black? Chrome? Scratched? Dented? Did it have any stickers on it? What?"

Chuck looked harried. "Take it easy. I can't think."

"You'd better think," Carp said, "or you'll be doing your thinking at Stony Mountain in a six by ten cell."

The words were barely out of his mouth when a stern voice broke in on them.

"If it's a six by ten cell you fellows want, you don't have to go all the way to Stony. I can oblige you right here."

They looked up and found Police Chief Robideau gazing down at them with his doleful brown eyes.

Later they sat in Pete's uncle's cousin's crew-cab truck, Pete, Chuck, and Wilmer up front on the bench seat, Carp and Wolverton jammed in sideways behind them with the box of beer stuck between Wolverton's bony knees. Robideau had got the same answers Carp had got, but at least he hadn't arrested anyone—yet. He had, however, told Carp to mind his own business under pain of being charged with obstructing an investigation.

They each held a Molson's Extra Dry. Trapped in the back, Carp longed for an open window; it was ripe around these guys at the best of times, and three of them had just spent a week in a liquid fish plant.

"When I first phoned Radek about the jobs," Pete was saying, "he was mad as heck about something. He pretty near chewed his end of the telephone off. No way was he goin' to hire someone from End of Main where the jerk-faces lived. He'd fly workers in from Mexico

first. I asked him which jerk-faces he meant, 'cause I know quite a few, such as you guys, an' he says all End of Mainers were jerk-faces for tryin' to shut him down, an' that us guys had some colossal godalmighty nerve suckin' up to him for jobs when people like Ivy Wortle were runnin' around out there tryin' to scotch his batooska."

Wilmer drank some beer and belched deeply.

"What's a batooska?"

"I dunno, but knowing you, you prob'ly got two of 'em. Anyways, he had to hire us 'cause no one else would take the jobs. But pay attention. I been giving this situation some deep thought, dippin' into it like a side-mount mower in a ditchful of ragweed, an' now I just remembered somethin' else. Last week I was standin' in the shower—"

"You was in the shower?"

Wilmer asked, startled.

Pete was offended.

"I wasn't *takin'* a shower, you dork, I was in there tryin' to find a newspaper. I keep 'em stacked in the tub, see. It's my library."

"Oh."

"Anyways, on the front page of last Saturday's *InterLake Spectator* there's this picture of Radek's plant with Gunther Schoss an' Ivy Wortle standin'

out front sharin' a big sign that says UNFAIR TO AIR! You guys see that?"

They shook their heads. Even Carp hadn't seen it. He'd been too busy trying to outstare his word processor.

"Well, anyways," Pete went on, "couple of weeks earlier there was another picture of Ivy, only not so noticeable this time. A shot of Schoss's cafe with a bunch of customers in the scene. But if you take and look real close, there in the background is her and Radek sittin' together, grinning like two puppies at a jerky-chewing contest."

"So?" Chuck grunted.

Pete frowned. "What do you mean 'so'? Are you brain-damaged or what? Ivy Wortle *used* to be cosy with Radek, then all of a sudden she's cosy with Schoss and tryin' to help him put Radek out of business. That was the situation when I phoned him about the jobs. So the question is, did Radek blow his top and knock her off because she dumped him, or because she was trying to scotch his batooska, or just what? I mean, it could be one of those things, couldn't it?"

There was a round of acknowledging grunts.

"Whadda you think, Carp?"

Carp shrugged. "You heard what the chief said. I'm sup-

posed to stay out of it." Then he couldn't help adding, "But there's another possibility. What if Ivy's old man got wind of her running around on him, and took care of her?"

"Or hired some goon to do it," Chuck suggested.

"Two goons," Pete said. He took his cigarette out of the ashtray and flicked ashes across Chuck Lang's knees. "Those two slamming doors."

"Whatever. Then he hiked her body out to the plant to incriminate Radek. If that's true, we've found ourselves a murderer."

They thought about that for a few minutes, then Wilmer asked Pete suddenly, "What'd they sound like?"

"What'd who sound like?"

"The guys you heard drive up at the plant."

Pete leaned forward and fixed his baggy eyes on Wilmer. "How the heck am I supposed to know that, you moron? All I heard was some footsteps and some slammin' doors."

"What Wilmer means," Chuck put in, coming to Wilmer's defense, "is, what did the killers' footsteps sound like they *might* of sounded like?"

Pete's scowl deepened.

"Run that by me again on short legs this time."

"Sure. See, what Wilmer's tryin' to do is figure out if Clar-

ence Wortle was there. So what he's askin' is, what do you think these guys *might* of sounded like, from the way the car sounded, and the way the doors sounded, and from the way the footsteps sounded. That's all."

Pete blinked a couple of times, then sank slowly into the coils of the seat. "Jeez, Carp," he muttered, "here we are tryin' to track down a blood-thirsty, head-whopping, neck-strangling murderer, an' all we got to help us is three guys in bad need of lobotomies."

"What's a low-tobomy?" Wilmer asked.

"It's what you're gonna get someday!" Pete hollered. "I'll give it to you myself!"

"That'll be nice," Wilmer said. "Thanks. Kin somebody pass me a beer?"

Carp went straight to see Robideau. He hoped Claudia Webb had not gone home for the day. He wanted to see her face when she saw that he had figured out Robideau's case for him. *Mr. Wortle* was the murderer, all right. The hands on that guy? They were *huge*. He had strangled his wife for running around on him, it was as simple as that, and Robideau should have figured that out for himself. After all, weren't most

murders committed by a spouse or close family member?

Claudia Webb was there, staring up at him over her typewriter and chewing gum with large, lazy sweeps of her jaws. But Robideau didn't seem too impressed with Carp's deductive reasoning. He cut Carp off before he could completely fill him in on Pete's observations.

"There's just one problem with your theory. It don't account for all the facts."

"Well, sure it does," Carp argued, "it explains everything. It explains—"

"It don't account for the fact Ivy didn't die from being strangled, but from the blow to the head."

Carp blinked. "But Mr. Wortle could of—"

"And it don't account for the flower."

Carp looked at him. "What flower?"

"The flower we found under Ivy's body. A violet. It was stuck in the buttonhole of her coat."

Carp recalled Claudia Webb mumbling something about violets over lunch but didn't get the connection.

"So she was wearing a flower. What's that got to do with it?"

"It was a perfect match to those flowers Gunther Schoss sets out at his street cafe. Right down to the ribbon. I believe I

saw them there today," the chief said, "violets on every table."

Carp left the police station convinced that the chief, as usual, was barking up the wrong tree. He knew he had the mystery solved. The flower meant nothing. Anybody could have picked one up off a table. Ivy Wortle herself could have done it. No, he still believed Mr. Wortle was the killer, and he believed Wortle had acted alone. The second slamming sound Pete had heard was Wortle getting the body out of the back seat or the trunk.

And as for motive, it was a classic case. If romantic betrayal wasn't sometimes a reason for murder, what was?

But he didn't care about solving Robideau's mystery any more. He finally had a mystery of his own worth putting down on paper, and he felt a sudden rush of inspiration. Olga had been right to drag him here. You really couldn't grow violets in a vacuum. All this excitement had got his creative juices going again. *Conflict must always be present!* You bet! And here was a jealous husband, an unfaithful wife—and a body! It was wonderful. All he had to do was get home quick while the mood was still on him, and put

black on white, as they said in the writing game.

He was brought rudely out of his thoughts by someone shouting at him. Turning, he saw Clarence Wortle hustling up the street toward him, looking mad enough to bite the lug nuts off a fireplug. Carp's defensive instincts surfaced. He wheeled about to beat a quick retreat but saw two more Wortles, Tom and Steve, jaywalking across the road to cut off his escape. These guys had obviously been looking for him.

The End of Main gang had been going around town blabbing about his theory. He just knew it. Word traveled fast in this town, no doubt about it.

And speaking of those idiots, here they came now, trundling along in the pickup, looking like a work crew who had just drifted down out of the north after a lengthy stay in a tarpaper shack. Carp decided that since they had got him into this they could damn well get him out of it, and he dashed out into the street, flagged them down, and clambered into the vehicle. They were all three sheets to the wind.

"Good thing we found you," Chuck Lang said, "I just remembered something about that bumper—"

"You're too late, Chuck," Carp replied sourly. "I've got

writing to do, and I want you guys to drive me home. There's Wortles swarming all over the place, wanting to lynch me, but you wouldn't know anything about that, would you?"

Carp couldn't wait to leap out of the truck and jog up the twisting driveway to the house. Who cared what Robideau thought? Who cared what the Wortles thought? Inspiration! He had it now. It crackled inside him like electricity in a Van de Graaff experiment. There was no time to lose. The least thing could spoil his mood. Inside, he turned on some music, went straight to his keyboard, and sat down.

Now, let's see. Where to start. How about . . . Carp gazed off into space as the CD player pumped Abbey Road into the room, and almost without his realizing it, his mind drifted gradually into Olga's Jack the Ripper Land, and his fingers started to move. He felt possessed by his thoughts. This was the way it ought to be, the words trickling out of his fingertips all by themselves.

The last pages began to emerge first. That was good, a strong sign that he was in control of his material. He closed his eyes as the story began to spill out of him, line after line of narration and dialogue.

He was vaguely aware of a car pulling up in the drive. Olga arriving home. Damn! Well, he would try not to let her disturb him.

But after a few minutes passed and there was still no Olga, it was suddenly her absence that began to annoy him. What the heck was she doing out there? She was certainly taking her sweet time about it, whatever it was.

He stopped typing. What if it hadn't been Olga's car he'd heard? He didn't remember any car door squeak, which was her usual signature.

It was in itself a minor mystery. One of those irritations that would rankle in the back of his mind until he resolved it and put it behind him. He got up and shuffled carefully across the hardwood floor in his socks to the side window, which gave a partial view of the driveway. There was no car out there in Olga's usual spot. The car he'd heard must have driven off again, or else it had pulled around behind the woodshed.

But why would it do that?

He wondered. Was this the way it had been for Ivy Wortle? Sitting at home alone and hearing the furtive arrival of her killer's car? Had she soon been riding away in that car, stowed in the trunk, all the way out to the liquid fish plant?

Carp went back to his desk and sat down. He placed his hands on the keyboard, then realized he had completely lost the thread of his story. Worse, he had lost that wonderful surge of creativity.

He couldn't believe it. He was appalled. He sat staring at the screen while the cursor winked at him mockingly. He suddenly wanted to pick the wretched word processor up and hurl it out the door. He had been barreling along fine, and a simple thing like a car driving up had completely derailed him. Hung him right up.

He wrestled with it, trying to reestablish his thoughts. He had been thinking about his character. How she had been sitting home safe in her house. As safe as he was this minute . . .

But just how safe *was* he?

Pretty safe. *Totally* safe. Unless . . .

Now he knew what had halted him.

He still had to resolve this little mystery about the car.

Suddenly he remembered that the back door might not be locked. He had left in a hurry when he thought Olga was driving off without him, and he hadn't checked the locks. Carp got up, went to the back of the house, and found that the door was indeed unlocked. He felt

uneasy about that, but he set the latch.

Then he thought of the sliding door that opened off the deck. He often left it unlatched. It didn't seem to matter, there being a good six foot drop off the deck to some very sharp rocks. Still, he'd better check it out.

He went back up the hall to the big front room, where he shuffled over the polished hardwood, taking short steps so as not to have an accident. He really should start wearing those slippers Olga had bought him—one of these days. Then he stopped in his tracks. A new thought had struck him. What if someone had slipped inside from the deck while he was down the hall locking the back door?

Ridiculous. But still . . .

It was a large room, with plenty of hiding places. A big stone fireplace jutted out from one wall, with a dogleg behind it. And there were floor-length drapes, three sofas, a number of chairs, several cabinets and bookshelves, Olga's work table, and his own little writing desk and file cabinet, centrally positioned with a view of the southern exposure.

Come on, he told himself, get a grip. Who'd want to sneak in here?

Who'd want to kill Mrs. Wortle?

Suddenly, with a sense of relief, he realized what must have happened. A car had turned off the highway into their approach road by mistake. It had then reversed back up the road and gone on its way. It explained why he hadn't heard a car door open and close, and why there was no car visible out in the yard.

Simple.

At the sideboard he helped himself to a stiff shot of gin to settle his nerves and was about to return to his desk when he remembered the loft. Why hadn't he considered the loft before? If the car *hadn't* backed away down the drive, if it had stopped behind the woodshed, someone could have gotten out of it and . . .

If he was going to get any writing done, he was going to have to go up there and check things out, which meant climbing the ladder and poking his head through the trap in the loft floor, which in the stories *he* wrote was usually the moment when the ravening psychotic lunged out of the shadows and poleaxed the victim.

But he had to get it done. Carp set his drink down, took the siderails of the ladder in both hands, and started up.

He ascended halfway, then listened. All he heard was the ticking of the big black frying pan clock on the kitchen wall. He ascended a few more steps and stopped with his head just below the level of the loft floor. He craned his neck but couldn't see a thing from this angle except the sloping pine ceiling of the loft.

He had to put his head through the trap in the floor.

He went up one more step and raised his head gingerly. Nothing happened, no ravening psychotic attacked him, and now the loft lay exposed to his view. He could see everything in the room; he could even see *under* everything in the room. See under the couch and the big easy chair. There was nobody here. Nobody at all.

Carp drew a shaky breath. He felt relieved. Now he could go back to his writing. He went back down the ladder, crossed to his desk, sat down at his keyboard, and tried to get back to his story. Let's see . . .

A hand settled gently on his shoulder.

He screamed, spun around, and found Radek grinning down at him.

"Jeez," Radek said, "you're jumpy." He showed some teeth. "Uh, what was your name again?"

"C-Carp."

"Carp," Radek said, still grinning. "Interesting. I've put a lot of carp through fish rendering machinery in my day. You might like to come for a tour of my plant sometime."

Carp knocked over his chair, jumping up and backing away.

"I seen you get into the truck in town, and I followed you here," Radek said. "I knocked, but nobody answered. The door was open, so I came in. I come here to do you a favor."

"A f-favor?"

"That's right."

Radek was a big man. Carp hadn't realized, seeing him next to Robideau at the jail earlier that day, just how big he was. He was big enough to make serious structural rearrangements on a man of Carp's size with his bare hands.

"Look, Mr. Radek," Carp said, "I really don't need any favors." And in an attempt to find common ground, he added, "You can forget about how I talked Chief Robideau into letting you out of that cell."

"Did you do that?"

"Well, I thought I did."

"No fooling. That's not how I remember it. I thought I just sort of walked out. But listen—" Radek leaned forward, and there was a malignancy about him, as well as a strong scent of fish—"let's talk about Ivy."

"Ivy. S-sure."

"Let's talk about what happened to her, and why." Radek's eyes were hooded. He had eased even closer to Carp as he spoke, and Carp in turn edged toward the sliding doors, one of which he now noticed stood partly open. He had forgotten to lock them in spite of himself. "There's somethin' you better know," Radek said, "all these ideas you been putting in people's heads around town today. Getting those drunks from my plant all fired up. If you don't mind my saying so, that's put you into a lot of danger, my friend."

"D-danger..." Carp stammered. And to himself he thought, I was wrong. Quite wrong. Mr. Wortle isn't the killer. This man is. And any second now he's going to kill me.

Three steps and Carp would be at the patio doors. But as if he anticipated Carp, Radek moved to block the way.

"I got a confession to make," he said. "Remember Robideau askin' about my lovelife? He knows darn well that me and Ivy—well, that we had a little thing going on between us."

Carp nodded. The whole room seemed to bounce up and down.

"But, well," Radek went on, "we had a dumb argument and stopped seeing each other

awhile. She was kind of fired up at me and joined that mob of jerk-faces tryin' to close me down. But she got over it. And then, just when we were about to get back together again, this terrible thing went and happened." He fixed his baggy red eyes on Carp. "But guess what. I know who did it."

Carp could only stare at him. "You do?"

"Yeah. I could of told Robideau, but that would of tipped my hand, and the killer would of been down the road and over the hill before the chief got his warrant filled out. Besides, I want to take care of this guy myself, know what I mean?"

Carp realized that Radek was whispering, and he found himself whispering back. But he still couldn't shake the feeling that at any moment Radek was going to pick him up and tear his lungs out.

"The killer," he said huskily, "was it Mr. Wortle?"

Radek blinked. He drew back. "Him?" He snorted scornfully. "Hell, no. It was—"

There was a sharp creak from the cedar trusses of the deck. Radek was turning to look behind him when there was a solid *crack*! His eyes instantly glazed over, and he toppled face forward onto the floor.

"Zum beeeple joose can't leef things alone," a voice said.

A figure stepped in from the deck where it had been obscured by the swell of the drapes. It was Gunther Schoss. He didn't seem to be quite as bent and hobbled as he usually was, and he gripped his Malacca stick in a provocative way, more like a martial arts weapon than a support.

"Zum beeeple," Schoss went on, moving into the room, "joose can't mind zare business."

"What do you want?" Carp managed to ask. He tried to wet his lips but found there was no spit left in his mouth.

"Vut do I vant? Vut do I *vant*? Vut you zink I vant? I heeer you at my restaurant, bragging to zolve za miz-dery! Already Radek was locked up. Already zings vas fine. Zen you go to see Robideau, unt right avay Radek is let go. Zen Robideau comes to zee me! *You zent him!*"

"No," Carp said hoarsely. "No, I didn't zend him. I didn't even know he went to see you. I swear."

"Hefferyzing vas all nizely zettled, unt zen you *scrooot it up!*"

The stick lashed out, went past Carp's ear with an airy hum, and took out Olga's Man of Two Natures Creation in an explosion of colored glass.

"Oh no," Carp groaned, backing away. "Please don't do that, Mr. Schoss. I'm responsible—"

"Zat is for shoo-oor!"

"Olga loves her pieces, she—"

"Sen she vill be bleezeed. I make eeffen *more* pieces!"

Again the stick lashed out. This time it smashed Flags of All Nations into Fragments of All Kinds, with a brand new geography that took in most of the big front room and sent a long archipelago of red and green glass fragments into the hall.

"My god," Carp wheezed, "what are you doing?"

Gunther lurched after him. "It's yoor fault. Stand still!"

Carp sidestepped. "But why would you kill Ivy Wortle? She was helping you get Radek's plant shut down. Only Radek said he and Ivy were getting back together again." His head hurt. "I don't understand any of it."

"Zat's right, you don't." Schoss's stick swished by and took out a whole long row of Olga's miniatures—Pygmies of All Cultures. "Zat's why I come. To straighten—" the stick hummed by "—you—" it whooshed back the other way "—out!"

In its third whickering swoop, the polished neck of the Malacca cane slammed into Olga's three foot high Birds of All Marshes with a brilliant eruption of colored glass shards, and in a sudden unaccountable

burst of irritation and fury Schoss bent over its remains and hammered its lead frame into a twisted gray mass.

The man was raving mad. It was definitely time to leave. Carp made a lunge for the door, but his stockinged feet slipped on the polished floor, delaying him just long enough for Schoss to shoot out a hand and catch hold of him by the shirttail.

"I *luft* zat vooman!" Schoss insisted. "I *luft* her!"

"You had a strange way of showing it," Carp replied.

Schoss shrugged and said vacuously, "She vas standing zare. She said she vas goink back to *him*—zat... zat *fish stinker!*—unt suddenly..."

"Boom?" Carp suggested.

He gave a huge nod, head and shoulders moving forward and back. "Ya. *Boom.*" Then his face hardened again, and he tightened his grip on Carp's shirt. "*Unt now I boom you!*"

Carp couldn't do much. Schoss's rubber soles gave him the advantage, and he began to swing Carp around with one hand in large looping circles. Carp twisted and pulled, and stumbling over Radek's outstretched legs, he went down in the wires of the word processor at the back of his desk. Schoss fell on top of him and began whaling away with his stick.

Schoss struck again and again, dealing vicious, painful blows to Carp's wrist, shoulders, and ribs. Carp fought back desperately and, getting hold of the Malacca stick, wrested it from Schoss and flung it across the room. Where it struck, another of Olga's Creations met its fate.

They scuffled in the wires and cords, Schoss grunting and trying to get his hands on Carp's neck. Carp broke free, rolled to his knees, and straddled Schoss. Schoss got his thumbs up under Carp's throat and dug them in deep. Carp began to see stars, little red points of brightness that twinkled and flashed. This time he couldn't break Schoss's grip. He pawed blindly for a weapon, and his thrashing left hand brushed the monitor of the hated word processor. In a sudden rage he grabbed the monitor and lifted it high in the air with its cords trailing down and its little cursor still winking furiously. Then he brought the electronic box down on the sweating, flushed head of Gunther Schoss as hard as he could.

The monitor split in half. There was a flash, a loud report, and a blue arc of flame. Electricity whipped and sizzled in Schoss's short hair, and for one bizarre instant the

Dutchman looked as if he were on television: a Letterman guest; Mr. Electro.

A fuse blew. And Gunther Schoss stopped choking Carp.

Chief Robideau stood in the middle of the room and stared darkly around. His brooding eyes showed that he was not especially happy with Carp's method of tracking down and apprehending murderers. Olga strode about from place to place, moaning and clucking her tongue over her shattered Creations while Carp plied the chief for explanations.

"Ivy had been carrying on with Radek for some time," the chief explained grudgingly. "Then they had a row, and she threw herself into the effort to close Radek's plant. I guess she flirted with Schoss while she was at it, and he took her seriously. When she decided to go back to Radek, Schoss's sworn enemy, it was too much for Schoss, and something snapped."

"How did you figure it out?"

"The End of Main gang came to see me after they dropped you off here. Pete showed me some newspaper pictures that were pretty interesting. And Chuck remembered that the bumper he saw that day had a bumper hitch on it. Not just an

ordinary one, either, but an equalizer hitch. Schoss had a hitch like that on his car for the trailer he used to bring back flowers from Selkirk once a week."

Carp shook his head. He should have heard Chuck Lang out.

"So where does the violet enter in?"

"Schoss must have sweet-talked Ivy into stopping by his place that final Sunday. The new flowers were there, and he offered her one—or maybe he offered her a whole flat of them, I don't know. In any case she only took one, and that was the flower we found on her body, one little crushed violet." Robideau shook his head at the folly of it all. "After he killed her, Schoss took the body to Radek's plant. He had to get rid of the body somehow, and I guess he knew Radek would make a good scapegoat, considering how vocal Ivy had been about shutting down his operation."

"How did you know she got the flower from Schoss?"

"Simple. It was the wrong flower. If she had picked it up off a table herself that Sunday, it would have been a daisy, not a violet. The violets were set out for the first time on Monday morning, but she was dead by then. So it's clear that she could

only have gotten the flower directly from Schoss."

Carp looked at Robideau with a little more respect.

The chief said, "He was pretty sure I was going to nail Radek. I don't think he liked you stirring things up."

"I guess I rattled his chain," Carp admitted.

"I guess you did. And in return he just about rang your chimes."

They stood back out of the way as an ambulance attendant led a dazed Radek away with a gauze patch stuck to his head, and they stayed out of the way as two other attendants hauled the stretcher out the door with Gunther Schoss's inert form strapped to it. Gunther would have a slow trip back to town. He wasn't in any hurry. He wouldn't be in a hurry again.

"Drop by later and I'll take your statement," the chief said. Looking around the room one more time, his eye caught on something. He stooped and picked up Schoss's Malacca stick and tucked it under his arm. "Murder weapon, I bet," he said with a grim look.

*

"Sorry about your Creations," Carp said.

"Actually, I don't feel so bad about them," Olga said. "Not really. You're safe, after all. And you caught the murderer. Or you flushed him out, anyway." She stopped sweeping up glass shards with her corn broom and looked at him. "It's like I told you. People get provoked about something, all steamed up, then they turn around and—"

"Boom," Carp said.

She grinned. "That's right." She set the broom aside and put her arms around him. "I guess you'll have to order a new TV thing for your computer."

"I guess I will."

"Maybe that'll get rid of your writer's crock."

"Maybe."

"But in the meantime you won't be able to violate anybody—unless it's somebody real."

"I guess."

"So," she said, "tell you what. I'll try and go slow when I leap out the window. I know you're not as spry as you used to be."

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MYSTERY CLASSIC

The Ruby

Corrado
Alvaro

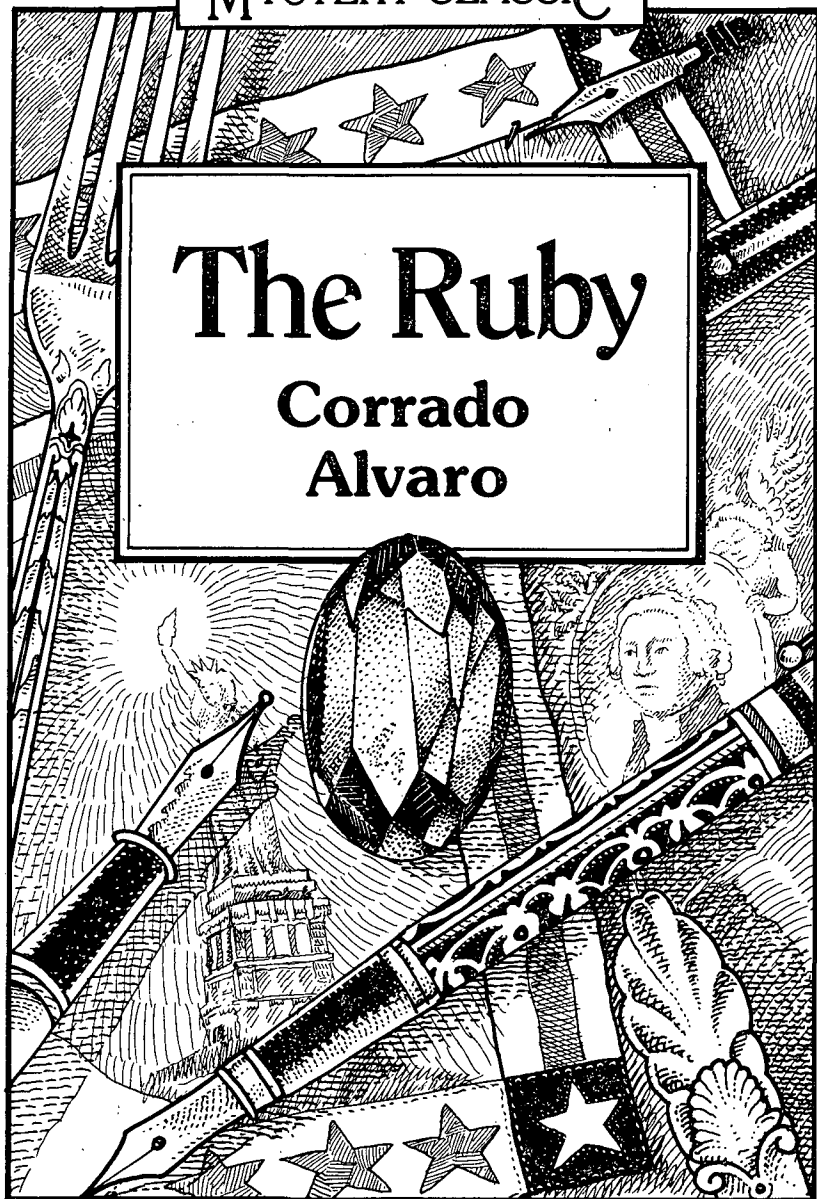


Illustration by Glenn Wolff

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The daily papers had recorded one of those news items that keep a town in a buzz of excitement for a whole day and finally make a circuit of the world. A ruby, as big as a hazelnut, a famous stone, bearing a famous name, and said to be of enormous value, had disappeared. An Indian prince, on a visit to a North American city, had been wearing this jewel as an ornament. He had suddenly become aware of his loss after a journey he had made in a taxi that had set him down—incognito—at a hotel in the suburbs, for he had managed to evade the attention of both his private bodyguard and the police. The flying squad was mobilized, the entire city awoke the following morning to a knowledge of the loss, and right up to midday hundreds of people cherished the hope of finding the celebrated stone in their own street. One of those waves of optimism and excitement had fallen on the town; the kind of feeling you get when the opulence of one individual enriches everybody else's hopes. The prince had not been very forthcoming in his statement to the police, but it ruled out any possibility that the lady accompanying him could have been responsible for the loss. They were not, therefore, to try to locate her. The taxi driver came forward to testify that he had driven the Indian wearing his precious turban, and stated that he had deposited him and the lady in front of a hotel in the suburbs. The lady was a European, and the only thing that distinguished her was a magnificent diamond, the size of a pea, which she wore in her left nostril after the manner of certain wealthy Indians. This detail distracted the attention of the public for a while from the missing ruby and whetted their curiosity still more. The driver, after making a thorough search of the interior of the vehicle, checked up on the "fares" he had driven during the early hours of the morning in question; they had been a businessman, a foreigner whom he had taken down to the port and who was evidently sailing for Europe; and a woman. The foreigner, recognizable as an Italian, had emerged from one of the houses where emigrants lived in a colony; he had been wearing a pair of trousers of generous width such as are popular with emigrants, rough, thick-soled shoes of a type nowadays seen only among people of that social class, and a hard hat set above a thin, clean-shaven face, seamed with wrinkles. His luggage consisted of a heavy suitcase secured with stout cord and one other weighty box, which appeared to be made of steel. He had embarked that same day, but any suspicion that might have alighted on him was immediately dispelled when it was realized

that he had behaved as though he was riding in a taxi for the first time in his life. He had not managed to close the door properly and had hugged the front window all the time, possibly so as to avoid being suddenly jerked backward into the road, and he gazed at the streets with the air of one who is leaving a town perhaps forever. The driver reserved his attention rather for the man who, on leaving the suburban hotel, had taken the taxi immediately after the prince and had given orders to be driven to the Italian workmen's quarter, at which point his place had been taken by a foreigner. The fare in question, of whom he had given a description and who must have been a local resident, was searched for in vain. Furthermore, the fact that he had failed to answer the appeal published in the newspapers, offering a large reward, was a logical proof that it was not he who had got hold of the famous gem. However, since the missing stone was world-famed and easily recognizable, it was hoped that one day or other it would come to light.

The emigrant, meantime, was on his way home to a country town in Southern Italy after five years' absence and was ignorant of all this stir. He had with him the most unusual collections of odds and ends—even for an emigrant. A suitcase, made of artificial leather which he thought was real, contained his blue overalls, pressed and cleaned, twelve fountain pens which he intended to sell to the people of the district, forgetting that most of them were herdsmen and not more than half a dozen of the inhabitants could put pen to paper. In addition, he had some crested table services, a pair of hair clippers which he had used on his fellow workers, a metal object whose function completely mystified him—it had the form of a pistol, but did not fire—twelve squares of American cloth, and some novelties to impress and amuse his wife, son, and friends. The heavy part of his luggage was the somewhat battered steel strongbox; the lock was operated by a combination, the six letter name "Annina." By way of ready cash he took a thousand dollars, which included three hundred to be paid back later to those from whom he had borrowed it for the voyage. In his waistcoat pocket he carried a lump of red crystal; it was many-faceted and as large as a walnut. He had come across it by chance in the taxi that had taken him down to the harbor, but he had no idea what it was for. His fingers had felt it behind the seat cushions. He kept it as a lucky charm for the future; perhaps he would have attached it to his watch chain as a pendant. It seemed odd that it had no hole bored through it. It could not, therefore, be one of those large stones

which city ladies have on their necklaces.

The various objects one picks up just before leaving a foreign country are apt to acquire an extraordinary souvenir value, giving one, as it were, a foretaste of distance and nostalgia. It was just such an affection that our emigrant felt for this lump of crystal, so cool to the touch, as translucent and clear as sugar candy.

He had established a small trade with all these different acquisitions. The strongbox, now fixed against the wall, the counter for his transactions, fountain pens in a box, crested table services, squares of American cloth on which were depicted the Statue of Liberty and angels in the corners bearing the portraits of the founders of American Independence, each square embroidered with white and blue stars—five long years he had patiently built up his collection against his eventual return; selecting whatever would seem most of a novelty to the folk in a region like his own, though he might have taken his choice from the shabby second-hand goods that come from heaven knows where and go the rounds among the emigrant population.

So he who had started life as a day laborer had now become a dealer in various wares. It had been the strongbox that had set him on that train of thought; he had taken to shopkeeping for no other reason. He had felt almost rich because all the money he had in his pockets was in foreign currency and would turn into a larger number of coins when he exchanged them. Mental calculations connected with this engrossed him at all sorts of odd moments. He felt a childish delight every time he fingered the red crystal in his pocket. He began to regard it as a kind of talisman. It became one of those useless objects we cherish all our lives and never have the strength of mind to get rid of, so that in the end they become part of ourselves and even family heirlooms. Whereas important things we watch over or hide away disappear, objects of the kind referred to never get lost, and our minds hark back to them at intervals. A few days later, for example, the crystal reminded our emigrant of the day when he had embarked for home, the interior of the taxi, the streets which seemed to roll slowly up like a piece of drop scenery at the end of a play and become distant memories.

He set up his shop in the upper part of the country town inhabited by peasants and herdsmen. A fortnight after his arrival he had furnished the ground floor of a peasant's cottage with a long counter and shelves, where the blue packets of flour paste and the blue muslin for housewives found a place, and on one side of the

shop stood a cask of wine on a couple of trestles and an earthenware jar of oil. The strongbox had been fixed against the wall, and he felt a great sense of pride when he opened it in the presence of his customers. In it reposed his account ledger and the notebook containing a list of all the goods sold on tick that were to be paid for at harvest time or after the animal fairs. Gradually his business got to look like any other business; it acquired its own peculiar smell, there were chalk marks made on the wall by his wife—who could not write—recording goods supplied on credit. His young son, however, who attended school and was now beginning to be able to write customers' names in the register, sometimes took a turn in the shop and managed it quite expertly on hot afternoons when all trade had ceased except that in iced drinks for gentlemen recovering from their afternoon siesta.

Slowly his wife's narrow, American-style slippers acquired more and more creases, and she herself the complacent, meticulous air of a shopkeeper's wife. The supply of new material which her husband had brought home had finally ended up among the shop-soiled goods, and only the hard hat, looking almost new, was still left in the wardrobe. The squares of American cloth had been distributed as presents among the important customers; as for the fountain pens, no one had wanted them. Someone had handled them roughly, and the fragments still lay in the box. The shopkeeper, who was a boy at heart, often imagined that the pen nibs were of pure gold, and he cherished them as a small boy cherishes tinfoil wrapping off chocolates. He also hung on to an old newspaper printed in English. He had refused to part with it even when he was short of wrapping paper. Sometimes he would scrutinize it carefully, and the advertisement illustrations would recall to him the people who smoked gold-tipped cigarettes, the street boys, the gramophones, in fact all the life he had seen in the central parts of the city on the rare occasions of his visits there. As for the lump of crystal, he remembered it one day and gave it to his son, who was celebrating his birthday with his friends. At that time boys played a game which consisted in knocking down and conquering castles made of hazelnuts by throwing a heavier one at it; the usual procedure was to select a larger nut, make a small hole in it, patiently scrape out the kernel, then fill it with small lead pellets. The crystal missile was just the thing, it was heavy enough to carry to the mark. Another of the boys used a glass marble of the kind extracted from lemonade bottles, which had the advantage

of being round. The shopkeeper's son claimed that his was more beautiful because it came from America and because it was red. He cherished it in the way that boys do who never lose objects of that kind. As his father contemplated this curiosity which had become his child's plaything, his mind would often dwell on the illusions he had once entertained in the days when he traveled about the world, and the world seemed to be filled with valuable things that had been lost which the lucky ones found. That was why he had always felt with his fingers under mattresses of berths on steamers, behind leather cushions on buses and coaches, according to where he happened to be. But he had never found anything. Yes; there had been one occasion. He had found five dollars in the street. It had been raining that day, he remembered.

SOLUTION TO THE APRIL "UNSOLVED":

Edward Jackson, the manager of Miss Van Hoppel's fortune, shot her to avoid prosecution for certain "irregularities"—namely, embezzlement.

| NAME | FROM | CAR | RELATIONSHIP |
|-----------------|--------------|----------|------------------|
| Alicia Halstead | Poughkeepsie | Ford | maid |
| Bernice Krantz | Newark | Cadillac | cousin |
| Cynthia Gravell | Queens | Acura | classmate |
| Daniel Lamont | Oceanside | Buick | ex-husband |
| Edward Jackson | Rensselaer | BMW | manager |
| Frank Ingram | Monmouth | Dodge | fiancé of cousin |

BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



Justin Scott's hero Ben Abbott returns for a second sleuthing in **StoneDust** (Viking, \$19.95). His Wall Street days are over; Ben's "fast track" led him down a criminally shady path. Now he's back in his hometown of Newbury, a charming old town quickly becoming a fashionable "bedroom community" for big-city folks who have made a bundle. It's the bedroom aspect of Newbury that starts the trouble. A weekend houseparty for four couples at the Fiskes' newly remodeled home (including a huge hot tub) ends with a body in a nearby covered bridge. Abbott's stomping ground is peopled with memorable characters, and he makes a droll and intelligent tour guide to Newbury. Scott has updated the cosy village mystery with contemporary American sensibilities, giving readers the best of both worlds.

Jonathan Valin's Cincinnati private eye, Harry Stoner, reluctantly takes on his eleventh case in **Missing** (Delacorte, \$19.95). Stoner has no reservations about his forty-year-old client, a teacher named Cindy Dorn; he is immediately attracted to her. He's less enthusiastic about her request that he locate a teacher named Mason Greenleaf, her best friend and lover for the past four years. Greenleaf's uncharacteristic disappearance has alarmed Cindy, so she tells Stoner his well-kept secret: he is bisexual. Although readers never meet Greenleaf, his character is revealed as Stoner pieces together the man's final days, talks to his friends, and gets to know Cindy better. This compelling portrait of a decent man and his anguished private struggle are at the heart of *Missing*, and are often in strong contrast to the biases of those around him, including Stoner's. The result is a well-paced private eye novel moved by its characters to a surprising conclusion.

Murder at the God's Gate (Walker, \$19.95) is Lynda S. Robinson's second mystery featuring Lord Meren, confidential inquiry agent to the fourteen-year-old Egyptian Pharaoh Tutankhamun. Meren and his grown son Kysen suddenly have their hands full. The Hittites are swarming over the boundary states, and all Egypt is blaming the pharaoh's late brother, Akhenaten, for his negligence. More threatening to Tutankhamun personally is the animosity the powerful priests of Amun bear the young pharaoh over Akhenaten's heresy; and the young pharaoh's desire to prove himself a man is pitted against Meren's desire to protect his life. Like Ellis Peters, Robinson knowledgeably instructs readers in the cultural and political life of a fascinating period in history while entertaining us with a puzzling plot, accessible characters, and the domestic details of their daily lives.

Simona Griffio leaves her adopted city of New York to return to her hometown of Rome in **The Trouble with Going Home** (HarperCollins, \$20), Camilla T. Crespi's fifth entry in her "Trouble" series. Simona goes home to learn why her mother has left her father in the country to move in with her friend Mirella and Mirella's family in Rome. But the day she arrives, she witnesses a fatal mugging of an art student named Tamar, and since Tamar had also been staying with Mirella, the presence of the police proves to be just the distraction Simona's mother needs to avoid her daughter's questions. When the murder weapon is traced back to Mirella's household, everyone is under suspicion, and Simona is forced to take up amateur sleuthing once again. Crespi has thrown some delicious ingredients into her pot: a long-lost Leonardo drawing, Simona's dashing ex-husband, memories of her former Roman days, an Italian prince and a wealthy American tycoon, and a touching exploration of Simona's familial ties. It's a recipe sure to please.

The mesmerizing city of Venice is the setting for Michael Dibdin's latest Inspector Aurelio Zen mystery, **Dead Lagoon** (Pantheon, \$21). Zen has left his Roman life behind for a brief visit to his native city, ostensibly to follow up complaints made by an old friend of his mother's, but actually to look into the disappearance of a wealthy American from his Venetian island home. Just as the alleys twist around and the canal waters swirl in murky blackness, so do Dibdin's plot and the motivations of his characters, including Zen's. The strands of family greed, local politics, old loyalties, drug-running, and police corruption are woven into a sophisticated, at-

mospheric tapestry as Zen conjures up an imaginative, idealized life in the city he will never be able entirely to leave. It proves to be as fleeting and illusory as the mists that roll over the cobbled and watery streets, distorting reality and shifting the very foundations of Zen's life, then and now.

(continued from page 4)

Martha Lufkin, author of "A Diamond's Way of Changing Hands," like Ms. Kittredge, brings her professional background to her fiction, in this case the legal profession. Ms. Lufkin spent twelve years practicing law before turning to writing full time, the last two years in private practice, the first ten years with major firms in New York City and Boston, and specialized in trusts, estates, probate, and tax law. She spent three years in England as a student, "where conversation, and manners, are a delicate and precise minuet," has worked in the antique furniture departments of two museums, has written articles on antique furniture, and is currently a humor columnist for the Lincoln (Mass.) *Journal*. "A

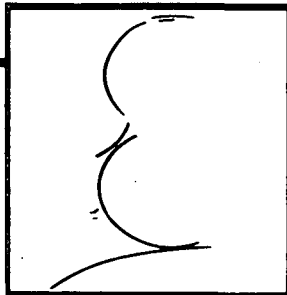
Diamond's Way of Changing Hands" is her first short story. (It originally appeared in a somewhat different form in *96 Inc.*, published by a writers' group to which she belongs in Boston.)

If you have been reading AHMM for a while, you will, we're sure, remember the many delightful tales published herein by James A. Noble. After a long absence, Mr. Noble is back, we are very happy to say, with "The Case of the Dumb Detective and the Humphrey Bogart Fanatic."

Mr. Noble was the winner of our very first Mysterious Photograph contest, his winning story appearing in the December 1982 issue. A few months later, we were pleased to publish "The Case of the Amateur Detective and the Chicken."

MURDER BY DIRECTION

by William Heller



With the Oscars rapidly coming upon us, Murder by Direction has decided to take a look at the 1994 films reviewed in this space, and other notable crime movies, to see if any merit an Academy Award, a consolation prize, or just condemnation.

My choice for a bagful of Oscars is John Dahl's noir masterpiece *The Last Seduction*. Unfortunately, the Motion Picture Academy of Arts and Sciences ruled it ineligible for Oscar consideration because it was first released on television, with a brief showing on a cable network.

In my book this picture is the best of 1994. Linda Fiorentino sizzles in a starring performance that can be labeled dangerous.

Dahl's other excellent work, *Red Rock West*, has suffered a similar fate because of its debut on the tube.

As for my top choice among all the other thrillers, crime dramas, or action flicks, it's pretty easy. Quentin Tarantino's stylish *Pulp Fiction* is not only the most unique Hollywood offering of the year, it's also quite a hoot. And that's no small feat for a film that basically follows the story of a couple of nineties hit men, complete with cellular phones, who are quite good at what they do and none too shy with their weapons.

The film features a number of wonderful performances, starting with comeback kid John Travolta as the long-haired, soft-bellied hit man Vincent Vega, and Samuel L. Jackson as his Bible-quoting, gun-toting partner Jules.

The two introduce us to their dirty work with the coldblooded killings of a couple of geeky yuppie drug dealers who've ripped off their boss. But on

their way to work—it's just a job for these guys—they debate the silliest trivia with the earnestness of a pair of Socratic scholars. It's this fanciful dialogue that elevates the mundane into passionate discourse and breathes life into Tarantino's lowlife, pulp fiction characters. It even makes the killers and drug dealers likeable.

Uma Thurman gives a way-over-the-top performance as Mia Wallace, the bored and trippy young wife of the crime lord Travolta and Jackson work for. When hubby is called out of town on business, he asks Travolta to take her out, and the results are hilarious.

A highlight of *Pulp Fiction* is a dance scene with Travolta and Thurman that is a campy tribute to Travolta's classic *Saturday Night Fever*.

There are many bloody and violent scenes in Tarantino's work, and there is an overabundance of drug use, but these are not saints he's dealing with. To his credit, Tarantino makes these two-bit hoodlums interesting, likeable, and thought-provoking; they're not merely morally bankrupt criminals.

While some 1994 films managed to tackle topical or even controversial issues, with varying degrees of success—*Disco-*

sure hit on sexual harassment, *The Client* and *I Love Trouble* touched on corporate corruption—not enough did.

One notable exception is Roman Polanski's *Death and the Maiden*. It's the South America-set story of a woman (Sigourney Weaver) who insists the man (Ben Kingsley) who gives her husband a ride home when his car breaks down is the same man who tortured her during the dark days of dictatorship. She's determined to prove it to her skeptical human rights lawyer-husband and to make the man pay for his deeds. It's a powerful and often chilling film that brings the work of Costa-Gavras to mind.

The other "political" release of '94 that deserves honor is a video of two fifty-year-old shorts made by Hitchcock himself. *Bon Voyage* and *Aventure Malgache* were a pair of shorts Hitchcock made for the British Ministry of Information in 1944, to be shown in France. But the wartime British government deemed the films too "ambiguous" and decided they didn't have enough propaganda value. They were shelved and only released last year, on video. These little gems, in French with English subtitles, are a must-see for any Hitchcock fan.

THE STORY THAT WON



The Mid-December Mystery won by James Wilson of honorable mentions go to Honda, California; John F. Henry N. Schulman of San Diego, California; Austin Peterson of Evanston, Wyoming; Cecil T. Landry of LaPlace, Louisiana; and Brenda Sackett of Richmond, Virginia.

ous Photograph contest was Saint Helens, Oregon. Hon-Debra L. Arivett of La Besnard of Irvine, Califor-

THE STAKEOUT by James Wilson

I'm cold... and stiff... and I'm gonna break Ackerly's legs when this is over. He's head of building security, also the reason I'm standing in my jockey shorts in a room full of dummies trying to catch a sneak thief.

He even had the gall to say it was my own fault, since I keep my head shaved. He thought it was a great idea to shave my arms and chest, too, just so I'd fit in with the rest of the dummies. He really shouldn't have enjoyed that part so much. I think maybe I'll break his arms first.

The door opens, and I freeze. Maybe there is a thief.

I can hear voices back there. Women's voices. But, hey, women steal things, too. Right?

I take a deep breath and spin around, which scatters dummies like tenpins, and shout: "Freeze! Security!"

Old Martha Roberts, the head of women's lingerie, makes a funny squeaky noise and drops in a dead faint.

But that's not the worst part. That stone-fox Shawna Gibson's with her. Seems like they were trying to swap a dummy with loose arms for a good one. Shawna's down beside the old lady, weak in the knees from laughing at yours truly. And I'm gonna have to go get her some oxygen pretty soon, briefs and all, if she doesn't stop.

Two years I've been trying to talk her into a date.

Ackerly's a dead man for this.

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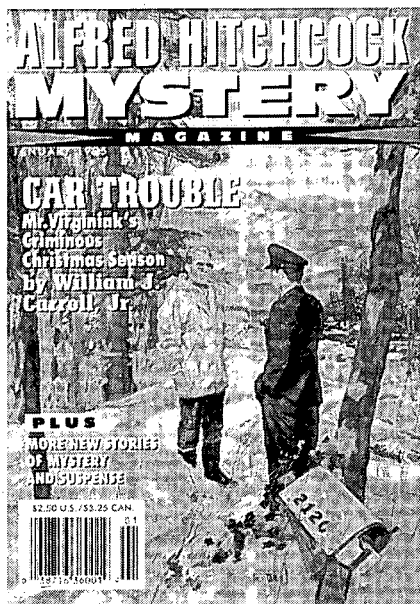
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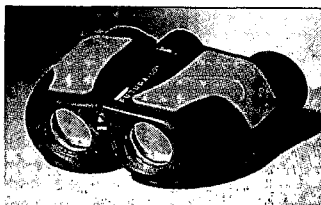
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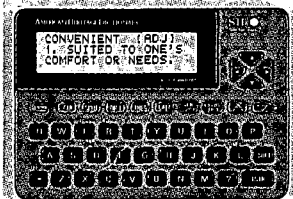
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